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OR,

The MYSTERIOUS HIGHWAYMAN.

A TALE OF COLORADO.

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TALBOT IN NEW YORK," "THE BAT OF
THE BATTERY," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

HELL'S CANYON.

It was a wild night!

The wind howled through the branches of the pine trees and wrestled with the junipers, clinging to the rocky mountain-side, wherever sufficient earth could be found to afford them a foothold.

There was a bright full moon, but it only shone forth at intervals, for the face of the sky was almost covered with angry clouds.

And nowhere in all the wild Western land did the wind rage more furiously than amid the pine-clad hills of the rocky range through which Wagon-wheel Gap cuts its way.

THROWING OFF HIS CLOAK REVEALED HIS FEARFUL FACE FROM WHENCE THE STRANGE, SUPERNATURAL-LOOKING LIGHT SHONE.

The Gap furnishes the best means of communication from the flourishing mining-camp of Del Norte to the rich country tributary to Silverton and the mines of the Ouray region.

To the East from Silverton, Lake City and the Ouray country, it was the only road at the time of which we write.

The Denver and Rio Grande railway had just reached the camp of Alamosa, and from there a stage line, composed of two-horse hacks, ran through the flourishing burg known as Del Norte, through Wagon-wheel Gap to the rich country beyond.

At the time of which we write it was the only ready means of access, with the exception of a wild Indian trail over the mountains which some of the prospecting miners had stumbled upon when the region was first invaded by the adventuring white men.

But this trail was nothing more than "a goat path" to use the term commonly applied to it by the men who knew of its existence, for only the early prospectors were aware that there was any other path through the rocky range besides the one that ran through the Gap.

And these old and experienced frontiersmen always shook their heads gravely when the old trail was brought into the conversation.

According to their ideas it was an unlucky trail for any one to strike.

There wasn't a man of the old-timers who hadn't some wild tale to tell of perils encountered by the men fools enough to think they could shorten their road by striking across the mountains instead of going through the Gap.

And in one particular spot, where the trail ran through a canyon, so narrow and so deep, with its regular wall reaching high up toward heaven, that the blessed light of the sun, the clear beams of the moon or the pleasant twinkling rays of the stars never penetrated to the bottom of the ravine, the miners had named the place Hell's Canyon.

The place had a terribly bad reputation, and if there wasn't any "spooks" there as many a credulous miner affirmed and the doubting Thomases denied, all agreed it was an extremely "onhealthy" place at any time.

Yet on this night of which we write, while the winds howled wildly amid the pines, and all nature seemed trembling with fright, just as the hands of the clocks in the distant mining-camps pointed to the hour of nine, a figure, which was apparently that of a man, sat on one of the boulders which were scattered lavishly along the roadway through the canyon.

He was enveloped in a dark cloak which he had thrown over his head like a poncho, excepting that there wasn't any hole for his head to come through, and it hung in shapeless folds clear down to his feet.

Indeed, at a short distance, the appearance of the man would have been sure to make even the most stanch unbeliever in ghostly matters, think twice before he ventured within arm's-length of such a fearful-looking object.

When the moon went under a cloud the canyon was buried in such a murky darkness that the motionless object upon the boulder faded into obscurity against the rocky wall of the canyon, but when the moon shone out clear and bright as it did every now and then, for ten or twenty times at a time, the peculiar shape could plainly be distinguished, being so different from the regularly formed rocks in the neighborhood, which were scattered so carelessly about that a credulous man might believe that in the old giant days the mighty monster had used the rocks in sport and had playfully tossed them into the ravine from the neighboring heights.

Nine of the night as we have said, and just as the hour was reached, the sharp sound of a horse's hoofs, falling upon the hard ground, resounded through the canyon.

Some one was entering the ravine, coming from the west, from the direction of the mining-camp of Blakeville, as a small settlement directly south of Lake City, in the foothills of the Saguache Mountains was called.

The figure upon the boulder bent toward the west as though listening.

The sound of the horse's hoofs grew more and more distinct but succeeded each other more slowly.

It was evident that the rider had been compelled to check his steed in order to pick his way amid the gloom of the canyon.

But just at this time the moon, in an accommodating spirit, came out bright and clear so that the darksome canyon was made bright enough for surrounding objects to be easily distinguished.

The rider was now near enough to be seen, and the man upon the rock peeping through two slits cut in the cloak which covered him, made out that the horseman was a slightly-built youth, mounted on a sorry-looking "flea-bitten gray" horse.

He was evidently in search of some one for he was looking carefully about him as he came on.

The rider was a boy of twelve or fourteen, dressed roughly, with a broad-brimmed felt hat pulled down over his eyes.

He was walking his horse and did not perceive the queer-looking object upon the boulder until he came close to it, and then the horse, by

shying and then coming to a dead halt, alarmed by the strange sight, directed the rider's attention to the man.

"Hello, you, sir, what are you doing there?" cried the youth in a singularly sweet and musical voice, drawing a revolver and cocking it as if on the alert to guard against danger.

"I am waiting for a messenger," responded the disguised man speaking in a hollow and unnatural tone, evidently trying to disguise his voice.

"Perhaps I am the one you are waiting for?" exclaimed the boy, evidently perplexed by the strangeness of the incident.

"Perhaps you are, and if so you come from the camp of Blakeville."

"I do."

"You're my mutton then. You bring a letter which you were instructed to give to a man whom you were to meet in this canyon."

"Yes."

"Put it down on the rock by your side there, then, and depart, but don't return the way you came; go through the canyon and down the trail and return to Blakeville by the way of Wagon-wheel Gap."

"All right; I was told you would give me instructions how to proceed after meeting you, but there is one thing you have forgotten."

"What is it?"

"The password. I was instructed not to give up the letter until I received it."

"Vengeance!" said the man, in tones so low and terrible that it fairly made the rider shiver.

"That's right; there's the letter on the stone," and he placed the note upon the boulder by his side.

"And now good-by."

"Good-by."

The boy rode on.

In ten steps he checked his horse, and looking back, said:

"I know it's none of my business, but in this world we always ought to qualify vengeance with mercy."

"An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, life for life, is the old Jewish law," the man replied, with measured accents.

"The men who fixed that code were beasts; you are a Christian, and as you expect for mercy some day, see that you show it when it is in your power."

"I shall be just, and perhaps for your sake more generous than I ought."

"Hallo! do you know me?" cried the rider, evidently painfully surprised.

"I do."

"I reckon I've acted like a fool in this matter, but I gave my word and I had to keep it if it had killed me. Good-by again."

"I don't know whether I ought to wish you luck or not, but I'll compromise the matter by wishing you all the luck that you deserve."

"Thank you," replied the strange man, in the same hollow tones as before.

A deep sigh came from the lips of the rider, and then a chirrup to the horse set the beast in motion again.

Along through the canyon, out at the end and over the broken ground down toward Wagon-wheel Gap, went horse and horseman.

When the sound of the hoof-strokes had died away the man upon the boulder sprung to his feet.

He cast aside the dark cloak which had so completely concealed his person.

In appearance he was a muscular, well-formed fellow, a little above the medium height, and dressed rather oddly in corduroy riding-breeches, high boots, with rolling tops, reaching nearly to his thighs, a blue flannel shirt and a broad-brimmed slouch hat.

He was young, and gifted with remarkable quickness, as was plainly evident from the way in which he moved.

Armed to the teeth, for he had two revolvers and a knife in his belt, and the muzzle of a third revolver protruded from the breast of his shirt.

But the strange thing about the man was his face, which was white and ghastly, and apparently as immovable as the face of the dead.

There was "no speculation" in the eyes, no movement to the muscles of the mouth, but all was rigid and marble-like.

It was a living man with a dead face.

And then from his countenance, too, shone a bright light, a reflection vivid enough to enable him to decipher the letter which the horseman had laid upon the stone.

He tore open the envelope, and carelessly resting his right foot upon a small rock, perused the note contained within it.

It only consisted of a single sheet of paper, and upon the surface, in a large, rude hand, were two written lines:

"He will leave at nine to-night, and cross the mountains through Hell's Canyon. He is fixed."

That was all the letter contained.

There was neither signature nor address.

The man with the singular face tore the note into fragments and threw them up into the air, bursting into a loud laugh as he did so.

"Temper justice with mercy," said little wise-head, he exclaimed, "and so I will, for I will be merciful and spare his life, although if I succeed

in my designs I will render that life so wretched that he will pray for death to come to his release."

Then he resumed his cloak, thus concealing his fearful face, and crouched down amid the rocks.

CHAPTER II.

1,010.

Go we back for a brief time to relate the particulars of a scene that occurred in an Eastern State, near to civilization's heart, and which has an important connection with the over true tale that we have set out to relate.

The warden of Sing Sing Prison sat in his private office one pleasant spring morning, perusing a letter which he had received in the evening's mail.

He had been away for the afternoon, had not returned until about nine o'clock, and found the letter awaiting him.

It was from the politician who was commonly called the boss of the political party to which the warden belonged.

In fact, the man to whom the official owed his present position, and whose power was so great that at will he could make or unmake men, politically speaking.

Just the person whom the warden could not afford to offend, for this modern king-maker was all-powerful just then.

The letter had been written that morning, was brief, and decidedly to the point.

"MY DEAR FELLOW:—"

"A particular friend of mine is coming up the river to see you this evening on a little matter of business."

"I want you to treat him exactly the same as you would myself should I chance to pay you a call."

"He has a favor to ask of you, and I want you to attend to the matter for him."

"It is a little out of the common run, but no hurt will be done to any one, and you must stretch a point to oblige me."

To this missive the bold signature of the boss was appended.

The warden was perplexed.

"What on earth does it mean?" he murmured.

"I don't like the looks of the thing at all and I'm afraid there's some mischief at the bottom of it."

"Who is the man? He must amount to something or else the boss would never take the trouble to write me such a letter."

"It's nine now," he added glancing at the clock, ticking away on the mantle-piece, "so he will hardly be apt to come to-night."

But hardly had the words left his lips when his man entered bearing a card and announced that a gentleman wished to see him.

"I told him it was rather late," the man continued, "but he said he came by appointment."

The warden glanced at the card.

"Lawrence Pendragon."

Such was the name inscribed upon it.

The warden had never met the gentleman but he was well known to him by reputation.

Larry Pendragon as he was commonly called was one of those lucky fellows who had snatched fortune by her scalp-lock at a single bound.

Ten years ago he had been an unknown miner in the wilds of the West, but the fortunate discovery of a mine of almost fabulous richness made him a wealthy man, and he had gone on from fortunate speculation to fortunate speculation until it was said that in riches he out-topped any man in the West if indeed he could not measure ducats with any millionaire in the country.

He was the president of about a dozen railroads, owned the greater part of the stock of three or four banks; five or six mining towns acknowledged him as the principal owner, he had bought his way to Congress, although he took little interest in politics and had even been mentioned as a possible candidate for President, but this was by some hungry newspaper men eager to get at his dollars.

And yet this modern monarch, the self-made man, was only about forty years old.

"Show him up," said the warden, really curious to know what such a man could possibly want of him.

The official felt sure that he was the gentleman mentioned in the boss's letter.

Larry Pendragon soon made his appearance.

He was a tall, muscularly-built man, with resolute features, cold blue eyes, sandy hair and a large mustache and imperial of the same hue.

He bowed and presented a card after the servant withdrew.

Upon it in the boss's handwriting was the injunction:

"Put this gentleman through exactly the same as though he was Yours truly."

There wasn't any signature, but the warden knew the handwriting well enough.

"Sit down, Mr. Pendragon, I am very happy to make your acquaintance, and I will try to do all in my power for you," the warden said.

"Thank you, I am much obliged," the millionaire replied, helping himself to a chair with all the easy grace of a man who felt he was completely at home.

"I infer from the letter of our mutual friend that there is some little matter in which I can be of service to you?" the warden remarked.

"Yes, I've a slight favor to ask at your hands," the visitor said.

"I believe you have some sort of a register here of all the convicts in the prison?"

"Oh, yes, the man's name, description, and the crime for which he was convicted, together with the term of his imprisonment are always written down upon his arrival."

"I believe you go by number here and not by name?"

"Yes, when a man enters inside these walls he loses his identity, and hereafter is distinguished by a certain number."

"So I understood. Well, I wish to inquire about a convict whose number I believe is 1,010."

The warden was an old and ugly man of the world, yet he could not repress a slight expression of amazement when the number of the convict was announced, for he was well acquainted with the particulars of that man's case, and he wondered why such a man as the Colorado millionaire should trouble his head about the matter.

He did not say anything though. Merely rose, got the prison register, turned over the pages until he came to the one he desired, and then called his visitor's attention to the record, which was as follows:

"1,010.

"Name, John Denver.

"Nationality, American.

"Age, twenty-one.

"Weight, 140 pounds.

"Description, tall, dark, brown eyes and hair, regular features.

"Crime, murder.

"Convicted, New York, January 10th, 1875.

"Term, for life."

"That's the man, I think," Pendragon remarked, in a thoughtful sort of way. "How is he getting along?"

"First-rate, no trouble at all; there isn't a better convict in the place."

"Well, I tell you: I want you to arrange it so I can have a private interview with him to-night," the visitor said, as if it was the most natural thing in the world.

CHAPTER III.

A STRANGE PROPOSITION.

THE warden stared, for he was utterly unprepared for such a request.

"My dear sir, it is so entirely contrary to our rules."

"My dear fellow! don't you suppose I know that?" and in the most familiar way possible the visitor laid his hand upon the knee of the warden as he bent forward.

"I am perfectly well aware that it is contrary to the rules of the establishment, and all that sort of thing, but I know it can be arranged easily enough, if you choose to oblige me."

"It is absolutely necessary that I should have a private interview with the man and in a place where our conversation cannot be overheard."

"Can you bring the man here, say? There isn't any danger of the prisoner escaping from this room even if I was disposed to help him, which I am not, for if the fellow is the man I think, it is money in my pocket to keep him locked up here."

The warden cogitated on the matter for a few moments before he made reply.

"Of course to bring the man out of his cell at such an hour was about as irregular a proceeding as could be well imagined, but after all what difference did it make?"

The warden of a great prison is like the captain of a ship on the high seas; he possesses in his own domain an absolute authority and though afterward he may be called to account, yet for the time being he wields despotic power.

Despite the fact that Pendragon was a ten-fold millionaire, a man whose friendship would be apt to prove valuable and whose ill-will dangerous, yet the warden would have refused to oblige him by complying with his request in a moment if he had not come backed by the political boss.

The senator was a man who was vindictive in the extreme, a powerful protector who stood by his followers at all hazards, but who would not tolerate the slightest bit of disloyalty.

A man who must not be offended.

And when the warden recalled the imperative injunction given by the politician that the visitor should be treated as though he was the senator in person he hesitated no longer.

"All right, I'll fix it for you!" he exclaimed. "I'll have to stretch a point, but the boss has always been a good friend of mine and I would break a leg to help him in any way."

"Yes, he had every confidence that you would do all in your power to oblige me," the millionaire remarked. "I explained to him what I wanted and he felt sure that you would put me through."

"Honest though, there isn't another man in the world for whom I would do it!" the warden exclaimed impressively as he rose to his feet.

"But the boss never yet called upon me that he didn't find me right up to the mark."

"In ten minutes I'll have the man here, and you can speak freely without being afraid that any one will overhear the conversation for I will see that the hall is kept clear."

"Thanks, and if I can ever do you a service, you may command me."

The warden bowed his acknowledgment and withdrew.

"Let me see," Pendragon murmured, leaning back in his chair and gazing about him reflectively.

"It is now five years since John Denver became 1,010, and it really seems as if he must have become mortally sick of the place in that time."

"I think about five weeks of it would be enough for me, and at the end of that time I should be quite as willing to die as to remain in confinement in this hole for the rest of my life."

"His spirit must be completely broken by this time, and that is the reason why he doesn't give any trouble."

"If he had any grit, he would be apt to kick over the traces once in a while. The chances are a hundred to one, I think, that I will not have any trouble with him."

After arriving at this conclusion the millionaire leaned back in his chair and awaited the arrival of the convict.

He had not long to wait, for soon the door opened and the warden ushered in a young man dressed in the striped prison suit.

"This gentleman wishes to have a little talk with you," the warden said to the convict, then turning to Pendragon, he observed:

"When you want me just call. I shall be in the entry without, and can easily hear you if you raise your voice."

Then he retired, closing the door after him.

The millionaire had an idea that this was said in order to show the convict that assistance was within call of the visitor if the interview should chance to be a stormy one.

The representative man of the far West surveyed the prisoner with decided curiosity, for it was the first time he had ever encountered him.

He beheld a young man, superbly built, almost perfect in every muscular respect.

A handsome fellow, too, despite the fact that his dark brown hair was cropped tightly to his head, and his face was smoothly shaven after the prison custom.

He had a long, oval face, clear-cut, regular features, a chin somewhat squarely formed, sure evidence that the man was possessed of great resolution, piercing brown-black eyes, which seemed made to look right into a man's soul, and his complexion was somewhat swarthy:

"Sit down," said Pendragon; "I want to have a little talk with you," and he motioned the convict to a chair.

The prisoner, upon entering, had surveyed the millionaire fully as intently as the other had him, and it was plain from the expression upon his features that he did not know what to make of this strange proceeding.

He took the chair, though, without a word, and waited patiently for the other to explain.

"You are 1,010," said Pendragon.

"Yes, sir, that is my number."

"But in the world you were known as John Denver?"

"Yes, sir."

"It's deuced odd, isn't it?" observed Pendragon, reflectively, "that when a man comes into a place like this he loses his identity and becomes transformed from a man into a number."

"It is the rule I believe," answered the convict, quietly.

"Well, how do they treat you here?"

"I haven't anything to complain of; I attend to my business and try to give as little trouble as possible."

"Yes, the warden informed me that you were one of the best men in the prison, and it is rather strange, too, for you can't have any very powerful motive for desiring a good record. If your sentence was for a certain time, there would be something to be gained by toeing the mark strictly."

"I believe that prisoners are entitled to a deduction of time for good behavior."

"Yes, that is correct."

"But as you are sentenced for life it will not work in your case."

"That is true, sir."

"Let me see," and the millionaire assumed a thoughtful look, "I think I remember some of the particulars of your case."

"You broke into a country house up on the Hudson for the purpose of helping yourself to a young lady's diamonds, but were discovered by one of the servants and when he attempted to apprehend you there was a scuffle in which he was thrown violently to the ground and his skull fractured."

"The man's death was an accident, of course, you did not intend to kill him and used no weapon, although you had a revolver concealed on your person."

"After you had freed yourself from the grip of the servant you made a desperate effort to escape, but the house had been alarmed by the noise of the struggle, and you were run down and captured."

"And even then you did not attempt to use your weapon on the man at your heels, although there was a chance that you might have escaped if you had used your revolver upon your pursuers."

"But, then, at the time you were not aware that you had mortally injured the man who had first discovered you."

"You doubtless supposed that a charge of burglary was all that could be brought against you, and you preferred to stand trial for that to committing murder and so putting your neck in jeopardy."

"Your surmise is correct; that is exactly what I thought, but you will excuse me if I say that I do not understand what possible interest a stranger like yourself can take in my affairs," the convict remarked.

"It is rather odd, but I do take an interest, and why I do so, I will soon explain."

"The fact that you did not attempt to use your revolver, and that, although you killed the man who attempted to detain you, it was more by accident than design favored you on your trial."

"Then, too, you were utterly unknown to the police."

"You were no old and hardened offender, but evidently nothing more than an amateur burglar, friendless and alone, for not a soul appeared to stand by you in your hour of need, with the exception of the lawyer who defended you."

"And so it happened that instead of being sent to the scaffold the jury brought in a verdict which condemned you to State Prison for life."

"Though when a man comes to reflect upon the matter, I don't know that such a verdict could be called a merciful one."

"I think I would just about as lief die as to be shut up in this place for the rest of my natural existence," the silver king added, reflectively.

"You might take a different view of the subject if you were in my place," the convict replied.

"Life is sweet, even to the most wretched of humans, and it is only natural for a man to cling to it as long as he can."

"Yes; I suppose there is a great deal of truth in what you say."

"But now to come right down to business: I will explain how it is that I am interested in your case."

"Of course you remember the name of the lady whom you attempted to relieve of her diamonds, although it is some years ago?"

The convict bowed silently, and a wearied, painful expression passed over his face.

The millionaire noticed it, and the harsh lines at the corners of his resolute mouth became harder, while a peculiar look came into his eyes.

"The lady was called Mrs. Bernardo Del Carmen."

"That was the name of her husband, who was an old Californian cattle-king, absolutely rolling in wealth."

"I say *was*, for the old gentleman has been gathered to his fathers."

"He is dead!" cried the convict, starting in surprise, while his breath for a moment came hard and fast.

"Yes, sir; the old man has gone to 'that bourne from whence no traveler returns,' quoted the millionaire, closely surveying the prisoner and clearly amazed by the excitement betrayed by the other."

"Dead—dead!" and then with a half-suppressed sigh, the convict drooped his head upon his breast.

A fierce look shone in the eyes of Pendragon for a moment as he silently regarded the convict and a contemptuous expression came over his face.

"The old cattle-king is gone," he continued, "and the young and beautiful girl who married him six years ago because he was rich and she poor, has received the purchase-money for which she sold herself."

"She is now a blooming widow with a bank account worth half a million."

The convict looked up in surprise, not knowing exactly what to make of the peculiar tone in which the stranger spoke.

"I'm speaking right plain, ain't I?" continued Pendragon with a short, dry laugh, which had little true merriment in it.

"But then, you see, I'm one of those square, straightforward blunt men who believes in mapping out the land exactly as it really is."

"Six years ago Estelle Spader was the belle of the San Luis Valley. From Fort Garland up to Hot Springs there wasn't a girl, red, white or yellow, who could compare with her."

"She was as beautiful as an angel and as poor as that bird renowned in Scripture and known as Job's turkey."

"The old cattle-king came along, seeking fresh fields and pastures new to invest his surplus wealth; he saw the girl, dazzled her senses by jingling his money-bags before her eyes and won her."

"And the end is she is worth half a million now which she earned by six years of torture."

"But the slavery days are past and she is a free woman again."

"Why do you speak to me in regard to this matter and how comes it that you take an interest in the subject?" the convict asked, a strange expression upon his face.

"The explanation is easy enough: I'm going to marry the lady."

The convict rose to his feet, his face convulsed—gasping for breath, and so weak from emotion that if he had not caught hold of the back of the chair he would have staggered back like a drunken man.

"Take it easy—take it easy, old fellow! don't get excited!" counseled Pendragon.

"Married again, and to you," the convict gasped and then dropped into the chair and pressed his hands to his head as if completely overcome.

"Yes, and a deuced good match it will be for her too," the other answered complacently.

"For though she is pretty comfortably situated with her half a million, I can see that sum and go twenty times better."

"Yes, sir, that girl was evidently born with a silver spoon in her mouth, even if she was born in a mud cabin and grew up like a weed on the outskirts of civilization."

"Her beauty has caught me, and yet before I met her I never saw the woman that struck me as being worth a ten-dollar note."

"Well, now to come right down to business, my wife that is to be, has got an idea into her head that you are a greatly injured man."

"She doesn't believe that you are a common vulgar robber, I believe, although I have not troubled my head much about the matter."

"But any way she has made conditions with me, which I must fulfill before I can marry her."

"You must be released from this place either by fair means or foul and I must give you fifty thousand dollars for a starter, so in some other part of the world you can try your fortune."

The convict looked the visitor full in the eye, his face strangely, unnaturally pale.

"And is there a condition for me in this matter?" he asked.

Despite the great powers of self-control that the millionaire possessed, he could not help exhibiting the surprise he felt at this totally unexpected question.

"By Jove! I fancy your wits have been sharpened by your sojourn in this retreat!" he exclaimed. "Why do you think that there is a condition attached to this?"

"In five years' time I have had plenty of time for thought," the convict replied.

"Five years ago I was only a hot-headed boy, ready to act upon the impulse of the moment; but since my confinement here I have had ample opportunity for reflection, and I feel now like an old man who thoroughly knows the world."

"This offer is made to get me out of the way, isn't that the truth?"

"Well, the condition attached to this offer is that you must leave the country and swear never to return."

"I refuse to agree to any such bargain," replied the convict, promptly, rising as if to give an intimation that the interview was over.

A hard look came into Pendragon's eyes and he looked at the convict intently for a moment.

"Haven't you been a little hasty in coming to a decision in this matter?" he asked. "Haven't you better take time to reflect upon the subject?"

"I'm not in any particular hurry. An answer at the end of a week or a month will suit me."

"I can give you my answer now as well as at the end of ten years!" the prisoner cried in a voice that was hoarse with suppressed passion.

"It is no—no—a thousand times no!"

The millionaire rose slowly to his feet, an ugly expression upon his face.

"Of course I am acting in the dark in this matter. I haven't the least idea why Estelle Spader, or Mrs. Bernardo Del Carmen, as she now is, should take the trouble to interest herself about you at all," he observed, slowly. "If there is a secret between you two, and she has reason to fear your enmity, I should imagine she would feel a greater safety to have you locked up here for the term of your natural life rather than have you at large and in the world, and backed, too, by a capital of fifty thousand dollars, which is a sum big enough for any capable man to go ahead on and make a colossal fortune, and the only restraint she would have over you would be an empty oath."

"Perhaps she thinks she knows the man to whom she makes such an offer; perhaps she has reason to believe that if he once passed his word not all the fiends in the realms of fire below could induce him to break it!" responded the prisoner, with fiery energy.

"Maybe so, but in regard to that, of course, I know nothing. If she has any reason to fear you, she is foolish in the extreme to attempt to buy you off. That is not the way to handle such affairs."

"She ought to confide in me. She should say this felon is dangerous to my peace of mind."

"If he ever comes out of the prison he has it in his power to make me decidedly uncomfortable."

"I would have taken the matter off her hands in a moment."

"I would have had a watch placed on you here, and if at any time in the future there seemed to be a probability of your going free, I would have arranged the matter so that the moment you attempted to do any damage, your thread of life would be abruptly cut in twain!"

"Idle threats to a helpless prisoner," retorted the man, contemptuously.

"For the last time, you refuse?"

"I refuse."

"Well, blame no one but yourself, then, if you stay here until death steps in to release you."

"I shall not die within these walls!" cried the prisoner, with sudden energy.

"That is all talk! the chances are a thousand to one that you will."

"No, I shall be free some day, and then—"

"Then what?"

"If you marry Estelle Spader, you will be apt to see."

"Umph! that sounds like a threat, and if it is I'll just give you a bit of a warning."

"My name is Lawrence Pendragon; Larry Pendragon I am generally called, of Colorado—perhaps you have heard of me?"

The convict shook his head.

"Well, I've come up since your time; five years ago I didn't amount to much, but I do now."

"If you were to inquire about me anywhere in the West, you will be told that I am a man as hard as iron, without mercy, and with plenty of money to back my game."

"If you should dare to cross my path, I would crush you as easily as though you were only a worm crawling in the dust beneath my feet!"

"Idle words again!" rejoined the other, scornfully. "You are but a man and I another."

"Hey, warden!" exclaimed the millionaire, "come in, I'm through."

The prisoner was conducted back to his cell, and the visitor departed.

CHAPTER IV.

THE ROAD-AGENT.

THE strange interview between the mysterious convict and the Colorado millionaire took place just one year before the night when the boyish-looking rider brought the message to the disguised man who waited in the deepest and darkest part of the lonely mountain pass known as Hell's Canyon.

And just at the time when the interview between the two was taking place in the canyon, a couple of men sat in the principal hotel of the mining-camp of Blakeville, busy in conversation.

We say the principal hotel, but in fact it was the only one in the town that deserved to be called a hotel, for the rest were miserable holes, mere common bar-rooms, where the sale of bad whisky was the first consideration and the accommodation of travelers decidedly a secondary matter.

The Pagoda the hotel was called, and it was kept by a broad-shouldered, weather-beaten, middle-aged man, who answered to the name of James Johnson.

But he was rarely called by this appellation, excepting by strangers, for by all his friends and acquaintances he was universally known as Kansas Jim.

Principally because he was from Kansas and amused himself by "blowing" about the superlative excellence of that region whenever he could get an opportunity.

One of the two men who sat in the best apartment that the Pagoda Hotel could boast is no stranger to the reader for it was Lawrence Pendragon.

The other was his confidential friend and legal adviser, a broad-shouldered, muscular Irishman of uncertain age known as Paudeen O'Ballahoe.

As a lawyer the Irishman was supposed to stand a head and shoulder above any other legal gentleman in the State, but he was cursed by one failing that prevented him from attaining the position to which his abilities clearly entitled him.

He could not let liquor alone and on the morning of the day of an important trial he was just as apt to make his appearance in the court-room so drunk as to be unable to talk straight, as to come in sober.

And so he had fallen, step by step, for clients had become tired of trusting important cases to him, until he had happened to come in contact with the millionaire, and Pendragon had seen from the first that the advice of such an able, wily and totally unscrupulous lawyer would be of great use to him, even if he never opened his mouth in a court-room.

So O'Ballahoe had entered Pendragon's service.

With his large and varied speculations the millionaire was in a lawsuit with somebody about all the time, and the Irishman's counsel was almost invaluable, for he knew every trick and turn of the law, and as a general rule legal victories are more often won through technicalities than justice.

The two men sat with a table between them upon which were a number of legal-looking documents, which the lawyer was busily engaged in folding and placing in envelopes.

"There ye are, me b'ye!" the Irishman exclaimed in a rich brogue which plainly betrayed he was a native of the south of Ireland.

"There's all the legal documents complete and as nice as nine-pence!"

He had just placed the last document in its envelope.

"All you have to do now is to submit these papers to Judge Jacob McKinney and get an order from him appointing a receiver. You submit my name, and the judge will put it in for ye, for I talked to him about the matter yesterday, and he says, says he: 'Paudeen, me b'ye, make the papers all right and regular on their faces, and I'll stretch the law to its fullest extent for ye.'"

"Thin if the spalpeens insist upon holding on to the mine, the sheriff must be called in and the property taken by force of arms."

"Capital! you have arranged the matter splendidly!" Pendragon exclaimed.

"But suppose they show fight and resist the sheriff?"

"Thin their blood will be upon their own heads," the Irishman replied. "It's their duty as good citizens to yield to the mandates of the law, do ye mind! And if the hull b'iling of them are wiped out in the fight it's no blame to you."

"Good enough; well, I must be off," and Pendragon rose to his feet. "It has got out some way that we think of applying for a receiver, and I noticed when the coach left to-day about all of the other party were on hand, expecting to see me depart, you know, to push the thing through."

"And if I had gone, I have an idea that the coach would be stopped on the road somewhere and some pretty strong arguments applied to me."

"That is the reason I planned this night trip. I know a short cut over the mountains."

"It is nothing but an old Indian trail, but my sorrel mare is as sure-footed as a mule, and I can make Del Norte before the stage."

"Then when I return with the court order it will be like springing a regular trap upon them."

"True for you, me b'ye! You're sure there isn't any danger?"

"Not a bit; besides I'm well armed, and after I'm once in the saddle I defy any animal in this region to overtake the mare," Pendragon replied, lifting up the skirts of his coat, revealing two heavy revolvers belted to his waist.

"Then, too, I sha'n't mount in front of the hotel. Mungo has taken the mare down to the edge of the town, going by the back of the houses so as not to attract attention."

"I'll take to the saddle there and be off before any one knows what has become of me."

The programme was carried out without interruption, and ten minutes later Pendragon was on his way.

He pushed rapidly forward, for so familiar was he with the old trail, that, aided by the moonlight, he made excellent time.

All went well until he entered Hell's Canyon, and then when he had reached the deepest part of it, a dark figure suddenly arose from amid the boulders and blocked the way.

The mare reared in affright, and Pendragon in haste plucked forth his revolver.

He was not going to "hold up" without a struggle.

CHAPTER V.

AN UNEXPECTED DEMAND.

PENDRAGON was taken completely by surprise, for he had not the slightest idea that he would encounter any danger on this lonely and unfrequented trail.

And that was one reason why he had selected the path across the mountains in preference to the regular road through Wagon-wheel Gap.

If he went by the stage road, there was a possibility that some wandering vagabond might try to play road-agent for the nonce upon beholding a solitary traveler, but upon the mountain trail there was not the slightest possibility of encountering any one.

The dark form that had risen from amid the rocks at first sight appeared to be but an almost shapeless mass, somewhat taller than wide, and at the first dim view he had of the figure through the gloom he thought it was a monstrous bear, but when he succeeded in calming his affrighted steed, and was able to get a better look at the mysterious figure, he saw that it was a man covered from his head almost to his heels with a black cloak.

It was a strange affair.

The figure stood right in the trail, blocking the way so that the horse could not proceed without running over him, perfectly motionless and exhibiting no weapons.

If he was calculated to play the role of a road-agent, and blocked the path with the intention of relieving the rider of his valuables, he was going about the matter in a very strange manner.

Always when the gentlemen of the road make their appearance, it is with cocked and flourished revolvers, accompanied by the cry of "Hands up!"

Pendragon was more puzzled than frightened.

His revolver was out and the hammer raised. He had "the drop" on the stranger beyond a doubt, although as the man's arms were concealed by the cloak there was no telling but what he had weapons in his hands; but as his arms were not raised, the millionaire felt sure he could put

a bullet through the man before he could bring a weapon within range.

"Hallo! what do you mean by this?" he cried. "Do you want me to trample you to death beneath my horse's hoofs, or to put a bullet through your crazy skull?"

"I guess you are the man I want to see," responded the stranger, in a hoarse voice, and Pendragon was puzzled to decide whether it was natural or assumed.

"I guess not!" he replied. "But I'm in a hurry to get on, and I've no time to waste with you. You must be crazy to jump out into a man's way in this fashion!"

"You can thank your lucky stars that I didn't take it into my head to put spurs to my horse and ride over you."

"Oh, there's no danger of that," retorted the stranger, with a hoarse chuckle. "Your horse is too well brought up to try that kind of game on a feller like me."

"But to come right down to the solid bed-rock of business, you are Larry Pendragon, I take it."

The millionaire was startled by this assertion, for it seemed to bode danger, yet still a sober second thought told him that there wasn't anything remarkable about his being recognized, for he was a well-known man, having played about as prominent a part as any large operator in the region.

"Yes, that is my name," he replied, slowly, feeling that it was useless to attempt to disguise his identity. "What of it?"

"You're the man I want to see."

"You want to see me?"

"You bet! I was told you would ride through this canyon to-night on your way to the county seat, Del Norte, so I jest laid in wait for you."

Pendragon was troubled by this announcement, and his first impulse was to open fire and lodge the contents of his revolver in the body of the stranger, but then upon reflection he thought it advisable to let the man explain why he wanted to see him before he began hostilities.

"Rather a queer place to select for an interview," the millionaire remarked.

"Mighty good place, I reckon, for two men to have a private talk without danger of anybody being able to overhear what's said," the stranger replied.

"Go ahead and spit out what you have to say!" Pendragon exclaimed, "for I'm in a hurry and have no time to waste."

"Thar ain't the slightest need of your being in a hurry," the stranger replied, as cool as a cucumber.

Pendragon was annoyed, not only by the words and tone, but because he had a lurking suspicion there was more in the speech than appeared on the surface.

"Perhaps you know my business better than I do myself!" he exclaimed, haughtily.

"Well, I reckon I know it about as well."

"Oh, you do?"

"Sartin! it would be a safe thing for you to gamble on. You're on your way now to the county seat, the camp of Del Norte, and you have taken this unfrequented track across the mountains instead of going by the regular road through Wagon-wheel Gap, because, I suppose, you were afraid that some galoot like myself might take it into his head to interfere with you."

"You reckoned that if you took this mountain trail you would kinder steal a march upon anybody who might want to stop you for a little talk."

"But, you see, you haven't made the raffle, for you are not the only man in Colorado who is well served, and humans in this world are apt to be dreadful leaky vessels sometimes."

The murder was out!

It was no chance encounter, but the man had been in wait for him; but as Pendragon felt that he held the winning hand, he thought he could afford to laugh at his antagonist.

"My dear fellow, you will have your labor for your pains!" he exclaimed.

"Is that so?" questioned the other.

"True as preaching! You are after money, I suppose? Well, I haven't five dollars on my person, not even a watch and chain or a ring. In fact, I'm about as poor a pilgrim as you could scare up in a month of Sundays."

"Besides that, I'm armed to the teeth, I've got the drop on you and if you don't speedily get out of the way I shall be obliged to put a few leaden pills into you in a way that you will despise."

"Oh, I don't want your money," the other replied in the most indifferent way. "Money is no object to me, and as to your having the drop on me, you must take me to be a 'tarnel fool to allow you to get the advantage, when by just keeping quiet I could have knocked you off your horse as you rode by me without giving you a chance to defend yourself."

Pendragon immediately perceived the truth of this assertion and again his mind became troubled.

"But that wasn't the game that I wanted to play," the stranger continued.

"It wouldn't have suited my book for to have laid you out without letting you know why it was that the blow fell upon you."

"You see this is only the beginning, and I want to post you about the matter, so that when

the licks fall upon you hot and heavy, you'll know where they come from without the possibility of making any mistake about the matter."

"What the deuce do you mean?" cried the millionaire, growing decidedly angry. "What bosh is this that you are talking? Are you drunk or crazy?"

"Neither, as you will speedily discover to your cost, I reckon," promptly replied the stranger.

"You have had everything your own way up in this region for a long time and I reckon you ought to be willing to give somebody else a show for their money now."

"Take the case of this Black Cloud mine for instance. You know very well that all you can justly claim is a quarter interest and yet you pretend you own three-quarters of it, and on the strength of a sale that never took place you are about to apply to Judge Jake McKinney at Del Norte for a receiver for the property."

"The judge is an old friend of yours; if reports don't lie like thunder you and he have been mixed up in some speculations that are no credit to either one of you."

"He'll do his level best to help you every time, if your case has a leg to stand on."

"He'll fix the mutton for you beyond a doubt and put in some tool of yours as the receiver."

"Mike Creegan owns a quarter interest in the claim, he is in possession of the property and swears he will not give it up without a fight."

"And thus he plays right into your hands, for having the law upon your side, you will be able to call upon the sheriff to raise a crowd, for you mean to take possession of the property at all hazards, and if Creegan gets killed in the fight, the accident will be decidedly to your advantage."

"You seem to be pretty well informed in regard to my affairs," observed the millionaire with a sneer, and yet he was both amazed and troubled at the knowledge possessed by this mysterious stranger.

"Oh, you can bet I'm posted!" and the man chuckled harshly. "I have to be, you know, for I calculate to take a hand in the game myself. I don't think the fight is a square one, you see."

"Here are you on one hand with ten millions of dollars, more or less, probably more, at your back, plenty of friendseager and willing to serve you, dogs who fawn upon you now because you have lots of money and plenty of influence, lickspittles, who would turn upon and rend you in a moment if you should commence to go down the hill."

"On the other stands Mike Creegan, the original discoverer of the Black Cloud lode, the man who really founded the camp of Blakeville, although, because old Tom Blake found the money Creegan insisted that the town should be named after him."

"There was modesty for you!"

"I've no doubt that you calculate in this affair to crush Mike Creegan as you have crushed a hundred other poor men and fattened on their ruin."

"But you are not going to have it all your own way this time, for I'm in, and I play a pretty strong game sometimes."

"And who may you be, pray?" asked Pendragon, with supercilious politeness.

"I don't know exactly what I am," the other replied, with slow and measured accents. "I wear the shape of a man, and yet sometimes I think I have the head and heart of a fiend."

"But you can call me what you like. I reckon you'll be able to find some name to fit me after you know me better."

"Now for business! I want those legal documents that you are carrying over for Judge McKinney's inspection."

"I'm going to check you in this first little move. Nary a receiver will you get on the strength of those documents."

"You scoundrel!" and with the word Pendragon fired.

The aim was point-blank, and it really seemed as if the man could not possibly escape a mortal hurt.

But he only laughed like a demon, and throwing off his cloak revealed his fearful face from whence the strange supernatural-looking light shone.

Pendragon's sorrel mare, always a nervous beast, shied wildly at the fearful sight.

The millionaire was thrown from the saddle, and striking upon the hard ground was stunned into insensibility.

How long he remained in this state he knew not, but when he recovered his senses he was alone and the silence of the grave reigned within the canyon.

He struggled to his feet, and supporting himself upon one of the great boulders, examined his person.

The legal documents were gone!

Mike Creegan's mysterious friend had taken the first trick in the game.

CHAPTER VI.

SOME NOTABLE MEN.

GREAT was the excitement in the camp of Blakeville when the baffled millionaire reached it about midnight.

His riderless horse had returned about an hour before, and going straight to his stable with the natural sagacity of a trained beast, had aroused instant fears in regard to the fate of its master.

There had been a great amount of talk, and wonderment excited.

The Irish lawyer and the groom who had attended to the saddling of the horse were the only ones in the town who were aware of the absence of Pendragon, but a dozen of the inhabitants of the camp had seen the horse come trotting into the town, and recognizing the animal instantly came to the conclusion that some accident had befallen its master.

O'Ballahoe himself was anxious, and as there wasn't any reason for keeping the matter a secret now, he announced that Pendragon had started to ride to Del Norte by way of the old Indian trail.

After considerable talk the miners came to the conclusion that the millionaire had either met with foul play on the road, or else his horse had shied at something and thrown him, and as Pendragon made his appearance in the camp a party were just getting ready to go in search of him.

The millionaire was in a terrible bad humor, and with many a bitter oath he related what had befallen him, and when he came to the description of the strange mask which the man wore, for he understood that the corpse-like features, which shone so in the darkness, was but a cleverly-devised trick for inspiring fear in all beholders, the listeners wondered greatly, for although there were quite a number of old stagers in the party, yet none of them in all their wanderings had ever heard of a road-agent got up after this fashion, and when one of them said as much, Pendragon exclaimed:

"This was no common road-agent! He wasn't after my money or valuables, but some legal documents that I had with me, and he got them too, curse him!"

"When my horse threw me I was stunned by the shock, and after my senses came back, I found that the fellow had not taken my money, though I hadn't hardly enough on my person to make it worth his while, but the documents were gone."

"Shure, they wasn't of much value," O'Ballahoe observed, anxious to put as good a face on the matter as possible. "They were only copies, and as long as the originals are safe it doesn't matter much."

"I'll have the fellow hunted down, though, if it costs me a fortune!" Pendragon declared, savagely, as he retired in company with the lawyer.

With the departure of the two the gathering broke up, but a few choice spirits who boarded at the Pagoda House accepted the invitation of the landlord, Kansas Jim, to "take something" before they retired for the night, and naturally over their liquor they fell to discussing the strange event.

There were five in the party besides the landlord, four of them old citizens, while the fifth man was a new-comer.

The four citizens were all old-stagers and representative men in their way.

There was Major Joe Pepper, a tall, upright, angular gentleman, with quite a military air about him.

Considerable of a lady's-man, too, although he was on the shady side of fifty and his hair and beard were white as snow.

The major was a "gentleman of leisure," he did not follow any particular business, although he occasionally played cards for "amusement."

Good judges declared that he was the best poker-player in the country and by his skill at cards he managed to pick up a handsome living.

A direct contrast to him was the little Jew storekeeper, Solomon Oppenheim, who kept the largest shop in the town, where you could purchase almost everything needed in such a region.

Old Sol, as the "boys" commonly termed him, was a little, red-headed, red-bearded fellow, who, with the exception of his wrinkles betrayed few signs of age, for he had seen fully as many years as the major.

Buck Tyler, the third of the party, was a brawny big fellow with a decidedly horsey look.

He was a speculator, ready for any trade that promised a good return for an investment, and was reputed to be the best judge of a horse in the State.

The fourth was Andy McAlpine, superintendent of the Yellow Chief mine, a canny, yellow-haired, yellow-bearded Scotchman of uncertain age.

The stranger made the fifth.

He was a tall, muscular-looking fellow, with regular features, smoothly-shaven face, piercing dark eyes, and long black hair, which he wore pushed over his ears in scout fashion.

He was plainly dressed and looked exactly like what he represented himself to be, a man who had come into the camp, possessed of a small capital, and ready to turn his hand to almost anything.

From the darkness of his complexion it seemed likely that he had considerable Indian blood in his veins.

Then, too, his name rather carried out this idea, though as a general rule it isn't very safe to go by names in mining regions, where names are taken and relinquished at will.

He was called Jack Mohave, and claimed to come from Arizona.

All of the party boarded at the Pagoda and as it was late they had sole possession of the saloon.

The landlord stood treat first, then the major "set 'em up," and the party settled down to putting in an hour or so of social enjoyment.

"Durned queer thing this 'ere," the landlord remarked, as he brought the last round of drinks and took a seat at the table with the rest.

"Mighty queer," observed the major, and the rest all nodded their assent to the statement.

"It looks to me as if some galoot had set in for to play an awful sharp game," Buck Tyler remarked.

"Thar's no use in talking, the boss was put in a 'pocket' in this heat, and whether it was done through foul driving or not, that don't matter; the heat's gone ag'in' him, and all the talk of that lawyer won't make him come out a winner."

The rest all saw the wisdom of this opinion, couched though it was in the style of the race-track.

"I don't exactly understand the lay-out—I don't get onto it, at all," Jack Mohave remarked. "But that may be because I'm a stranger and not posted."

The rest all nodded; a man must know how matters were before he could see the drift of the game.

"You spin the yarn, major," said the landlord. "You know the story from the beginning to the end, and kin git nearer to the rights of the thing than any other man in the camp."

"The major is 'bout the oldest inhabitant in this hyer burg, and what he don't know 'bout the camp of Blakeville ain't worth knowing."

The old gentleman bowed with becoming modesty at the compliment.

"I was one of the first men in when the rush took place after the discovery of the Black Cloud lode."

"That was the first valuable lead struck in this locality."

"And that's the identical mine 'bout which all this rumpus is being kicked up now," said the landlord.

"Thar you see is something I don't know anything about," the gentleman from Arizona remarked.

"But as talking is dry work, suppose you fill 'em up again, landlord."

Kansas Jim hastened to bring a new supply.

CHAPTER VII.

THE MAJOR'S STORY.

ALL of the party took a swig at the liquor, then the veteran sport cleared his throat and began:

"As I said, the first big strike in the town was the Black Cloud lead."

There were two men concerned in the strike, Tom Blake, who was a man about fifty, with a little money at his back, and Mike Creegan, one of the best prospectors living, but a singularly unlucky man.

"Blake and Creegan were in together. Blake found the money—put up every red cent, in fact, and was out a couple of thousand dollars when the Black Cloud strike was made."

"The mine was a rich one, but was one of the peculiar kind that required money to develop it properly."

"Blake put in every cent he could raise, but he hadn't enough, so he sold a quarter interest to Larry Pendragon who, having plenty of money, is always on the lookout for just such chances."

"He gave a hundred thousand dollars for the quarter interest; cheap as dirt it was, for the mine had been estimated to be worth close to a million."

"The money put the enterprise on its legs at once. The proper machinery was put in and the thing began to hold its own."

"It isn't very often that you find such a valuable property in the hands of so few men. Larry Pendragon owned a quarter, Mike Creegan a quarter, and old Blake a half."

"Well, now comes the strange part of the story," continued the major, becoming very impressive in his manner.

"Just as the concern got into good running order, a circumstance happened that broke old Blake all up—split him right down the back, so to speak."

"The old man was a widower, with an only son, a boy about twenty-one or two that he regarded as the apple of his eye. He was attending a college at the East, and all of a sudden disappeared, leaving no more trace behind him than if he had vanished into thin air."

"Blake and Creegan spent all they could raise in trying to find out what had become of him, for Mike Creegan is an odd kind of a man, who never got married, and he loved his partner's son about as well as if he had been his own."

"It was about five years back that the boy disappeared, and the search was not given up until about a month or two ago; then old Blake broke down under the strain."

"He had been traveling all round, you know,

in search of his son, even went to Europe, and he was too old a man to bear up, and he got kinder silly."

"Perfectly harmless, you see, but he don't know exactly what he's doing, but is kinder mooping round 'bout his lost boy all the time."

"And now all of a sudden up pops Larry Pendragon, who says the old man sold him his interest in the mine for two hundred thousand dollars, a clear half, you know, which would make Larry's share amount to three-quarters and so give him control of the property."

"But as opposed to this statement Creegan produced a bill of sale showing that in consideration of the money advanced by him to the old man to search for the lost son, old Blake had made over to him half of his interest, one-quarter of which would make him half-owner of the mine, and as the sale was prior to the one to Pendragon, the lawyers say his title is good."

"Now comes the joke of the thing. Old Blake denies that he ever sold his interest to Pendragon, although of course as he is real foolish at times, it may be that his testimony ain't worth much."

"Still if he knew enough to make a bargain regarding the disposal of so valuable a property, his evidence in regard to the sale ought to be worth something."

"Pendragon has a strong case in regard to the sale."

"He says the old man came to him and offered to sell, and he, after some dickering, gave him a certified check on the First National Bank of Denver, for two hundred thousand dollars."

"O'Ballahoe, who is Pendragon's right-hand man, said he saw the check delivered to the old man, and the bank cashier at Denver distinctly remembers certifying the check, because checks for two hundred thousand dollars are not common, and he was sure it was drawn to the order of Thomas Blake."

"But the check has never been cashed and the money lies in the bank waiting for it."

"And here's a weak point about Pendragon's claim that he bought a half-interest in the mine."

"The bill of sale, which seems to be in Blake's handwriting though he denies it, merely says, 'all my interest in the Black Cloud mine,' but doesn't state what that interest amounts to."

"Anybody would have thought that O'Ballahoe, who is just as sharp a lawyer as can be scared up in a thousand miles, would have looked out about having everything made clear and plain so that there couldn't be any mistake about the matter, but the general belief is that the way the trick was worked, old man Blake was induced to h'ist more liquor than was good for him—the old man drinks like a fish now—and as O'Ballahoe is a regular soaker too, he wasn't in good condition to look right sharp after anything."

"Of course it was a mighty smart trick, for a half-interest in the mine is worth five hundred thousand if it is worth a cent, and there's plenty of well-heeled men willing to club together and put up the money too."

"Creegan has possession of the mine, claims a three-quarter ownership, and swears that he will never go out of it until he is carried out feet first, while Larry Pendragon declares that as he owns the controlling interest the trick must be worked as he says, if there is any law in Colorado."

"A queer affair!" remarked Kansas Jim.

Then they all took another drink at the landlord's expense and the party broke up.

CHAPTER VIII.

A DESPERATE ATTEMPT.

STOP we now the progress of our tale for awhile, and relate an incident which has an important bearing upon our story, and which occurred exactly one month before the time of the events related in our last chapter.

Go we again to Sing Sing's cold stone walls, the famous prison of the Empire State, which in its way is about as well known as Newgate in England or Toulon in France.

Since the time of the interview between the convict numbered 1,010, and the Colorado Silver King, the warden had surveyed the prisoner with a great deal of attention.

His curiosity having been excited by the strange circumstance, he had questioned the convict in regard to the matter, but the latter deftly evaded answering by saying:

"Oh, it was all a mistake I guess; I was not the man he took me to be at all."

The warden had meditated long and earnestly over the subject and he had come to the conclusion that there was money in it if he could only manage to get at the secret of the mystery. So he attempted to induce the convict to confide in him.

"See here, young fellow," he had said one day when there was a favorable opportunity to speak to the man without danger of any one overhearing the conversation.

"If there's any racket going on where there's a chance to make some money without too much trouble I want you to understand that I am in every time."

"Don't be afraid to let me into the thing, for

if you can't work it yourself, the chances are that I can if you'll give me the points. I've got just about as strong a pull, politically, as any man you can find in the State, unless he is 'way up at the top of the tree."

"If there's any fellow in the world able to do anything for you, I'm the man!"

All this, and much more the official urged. But the prisoner only shook his head.

"Honestly, I don't know any racket that's got any money in it," he replied. "I'd be glad to tell you if I did—I'd be glad to grasp at any chance to get out of this prison, for it isn't a pleasant thought for a man as young as I am to reflect that I am to spend all the rest of my life here."

"A pardon from the Governor for a life-convict can be worked sometimes, you know," the warden suggested, "unless the prisoner happens to be such a murdering scoundrel that it would kick up too much of a row to let him go loose."

"You know there's only a small percentage of life prisoners who ever serve out their time; ten or twelve years is about as long as the most of them put in."

"It takes influence to work the trick, but it can be done, you know, if it is set about in the proper way."

"There's no chance for me; I am utterly friendless," the convict answered, sadly.

"You're a good fellow, as little trouble as any man I ever had in the place, and I'd be glad to do you a good turn if I could," the warden answered.

"I had an idea from the fact of this Silver King coming to see you that you were mixed up in some mining business, maybe had hold of some secret with money at the back of it, and I thought if that was so and you choose to let me in, why, there's certain men I know who would almost move heaven and earth to get you out of here, if they saw their way clear to make five or ten thousand dollars."

"Of course, I should expect my little rake, too."

Again the prisoner shook his head.

"You are wrong in your surmise," he said. "It is as I told you, all a mistake on the part of this Pendragon. I am not the man he took me to be at all."

The warden retired, not at all satisfied, for the idea was in his mind that there was some secret connected with the convict and he could not get rid of the impression.

Six months passed away and the warden had almost forgotten the mysterious visit of Pendragon, when it was again forcibly brought to his mind by a strange circumstance.

1,010 was employed in the stone yard, and in some mysterious manner, when darkness came on—it was in October, and the days were shortening rapidly—he contrived to elude the vigilance of his guards and conceal himself amid the rubbish in an old shanty which was near at hand.

Then when he thought the coast was clear he made a bold dash for liberty.

He ran to the water's edge and plunged boldly into the river; but happened, unfortunately for him, to attract the attention of one of the vigilant prison-guards, who was armed with a rifle.

The guard at once ran to the river.

The fugitive was some hundred feet distant, breasting the water with rapid strokes, evidently a magnificent swimmer.

"Come back, or I'll put a ball through you!" cried the guard, leveling the rifle.

CHAPTER IX.

THE FATE OF THE PRISONER.

THE fugitive never heeded the demand, but exerted all his powers to force his way through the water.

The guard was a new man; his instructions had been to prevent a convict from escaping even if he had to kill him; but, like the recruit on the field of battle, his heart failed him at the critical moment.

He was a dead shot, and it seemed to him to be a great deal like murder to put a ball through the fugitive.

"I reckon if I wing him it will scare the critter so that he will give up!" he muttered.

The night was light, the moon rising, so he had ample opportunity to take aim.

"Look out! I'm going to sock it to you!" he cried, and with the last word he fired.

But the fugitive was a man of nerve.

He was determined to escape and had made up his mind that he would rather find a grave beneath the dark waters than return to the hell on earth which his prison-house was to him.

So, anticipating the action of the guard, he dived just as the report of the rifle rung on the air.

But he only remained under water for a moment; then he rose to the surface with a groan of agony which plainly reached the ears of the guard on the shore.

"I knew I could plug him," the rifleman exclaimed; "but, poor cuss! I'm afraid that instead of winging him I have put the ball plum through him."

The fugitive was endeavoring to still swim onward, but from his actions it was apparent that he was badly hurt.

The guard fancied he could see that the water near him was tinged with blood.

Then a cloud sailed over the face of the moon, and just as the darkness set in a despairing cry arose from the lips of the swimmer.

It was the moan of a strong man wrestling with the Dark Angel and feeling that his strength was going fast.

When the cloud passed away the fugitive had disappeared.

"I reckoned so!" the guard exclaimed, regretfully. "I plugged the poor cuss for good and all, though I swear I didn't go for to do it, for I calculated to put a ball through the fleshy part of his shoulder."

By this time the prison officials had been aroused, and the warden himself came hurrying to the spot.

The absence of 1,010 had been discovered, and when the shot was heard it gave rise to the natural supposition that the escaping convict had been discovered.

The warden himself was one of the first to reach the ground.

To him the guard explained what had transpired.

The guard-boat was at once ordered out, so that a thorough search could be made.

As the warden shrewdly observed:

"It may be that it is just as you think. You may have put a ball through him, inflicting a mortal wound, and the body has sunk, and then again the fellow may be playing 'possum, just pretending he was wounded, so that you wouldn't go for him again."

"Anyway, we'll find out for sure pretty soon!"

But the official was wrong in this surmise, for the most ample search did not throw any light upon the fate of the convict.

The very elements themselves seemed leagued to favor the fugitive.

Hardly had the guard-boat got into the water when the wind commenced to rise and cloud after cloud came roving across the sky, so that the light of the moon was denied to the searchers.

But the warden was an obstinate man, and he stuck to the search in spite of the disadvantages; but after a couple of hours he gave it up, leaning to the opinion that the guard was right in his belief that he had inflicted a mortal wound upon the fugitive and the body had sunk.

"Well, whoever he was, for I guess John Denver wasn't his right name, the thing is played out now," the warden remarked to himself in the solitude of his private apartment. "I did think there might be a chance for me to make a stake out of the mystery, but it's gone up now."

Then the thoughts of the official turned to the Colorado millionaire.

"I wonder how Pendragon will feel about this little affair?" he mused. "I wonder if it will be of any interest to him whether the man is alive or dead?"

"Tisn't a sure thing that he has passed in his checks, although I don't think there is much doubt about it; still, he may have cunning enough to try to fool the guard by pretending to be hit when the ball had really missed him."

"He might have dived and swum under water instead of sinking from the effects of the wound, as the guard believed."

"It was cloudy at the time, so that the trick might be worked, if he was an extra good swimmer, but it is only one chance out of a thousand."

"Anyhow, I will not write to Pendragon about the matter until I am certain the man is dead."

"If he has gone up the spout the body will be found, and if we don't find any body it will be big odds that the fellow has got away."

This was a sage conclusion, but in his own mind the warden felt morally certain that convict 1,010 had found a grave in the restless waters.

He had known a dozen men to try to escape from durance vile in that manner, and not a single man had succeeded in the attempt.

The convicts had either been killed by the bullets of the guards, captured by the boats sent in chase of them, or else drowned in the desperate attempt.

Information of the escape was at once sent to all the river towns, and a small reward offered for the recovery of the body.

On the second day the warden received word that the body of a drowned man had been found on the opposite side of the Hudson, about ten miles below Sing Sing.

The official hastened to view the remains.

They were badly disfigured, the face particularly so, but from the general appearance of the body the warden felt positive that it was the remains of John Denver.

It was clad in the striped prison-suit, and as there wasn't any other prisoner missing, this seemed conclusive evidence.

But there was still more proof.

When the body was examined a bullet-wound was found, extending clear through the body, piercing the lungs.

It was evident now to the searchers that the statement of the guard was correct.

Now that he had some good grounds to go upon, the warden wrote to the Colorado millionaire, giving full particulars of the tragedy, explaining as a reason for troubling Pendragon about the matter that he thought the Silver

King might be interested in the fate of the convict.

In return the warden received a brief note which stated that the writer did not take the slightest interest in the subject, knew nothing of the man, but had only called to see him at the solicitation of a friend, who thought that from the prisoner a certain bit of information might be obtained, but he was very much obliged to the official for his kindness, and as a slight compensation for his trouble begged the acceptance of "the inclosed check for one hundred dollars."

The warden chuckled as he stowed the check away in his pocketbook.

"There's some pleasure in doing business with a man like that!" he exclaimed. "It's a good bit of policy too, for it may be in my power to do him a favor one of these days, and you can bet your bottom dollar I would do my level best for him, every time!"

And this was a sample of how the Colorado Silver King did business. He made it a point to make all men of note his friends if it did not cost too much.

And now turn we the wheels of Father Time's chariot ahead for six months, which brings us to about the time of the appearance of the mysterious mask in the dark canyon, when the millionaire was despoiled of his valuable documents.

Never before in all his life had the Silver King met with such a decided and unexpected check.

He was furious with rage, the more so because the blow had been dealt him in such a peculiar manner that he was unable to tell who did the job, and so could not strike back.

Naturally he sought O'Ballahoe for counsel, and that worthy immediately declared that it didn't make any difference who did the job. Mike Creegan was the only man who could be benefited by the robbery, and therefore it was clear he was the instigator of the outrage.

"I'm sure it wasn't Creegan," the millionaire declared. "The man was not as tall as Creegan and his voice I did not recognize."

"True, it was disguised, but if it had been Creegan I would surely have been able to have told him by his voice."

"In a game of this kind, me jewel, it's the bold hand that wins," the old lawyer remarked.

"Suppose we be after seeing Creegan and tax him to his face with having a hand in the job?"

"I think that would be a good idea," the other replied, after thinking the matter over for a moment.

"It's the best thing to be done!" the lawyer asserted. "We force the enemy to show phat he manes to do."

"We'll go to-morrow morning."

And so they did.

Ever since the millionaire had made manifest his intention to seize the property, the Black Cloud works had been turned into a fortress, and it would have been just as easy for a stranger in war times to have penetrated into an important fortification and ascertained its weak points as for anyone whom the occupants did not know to be a devoted friend, to gain admission into the mine.

In early days of the settlement there had been trouble with the Indians of the Ute tribe, who came into the neighborhood in a warlike manner a half-a-dozen times, and as a protection against the angry-minded red-men a strong stockade fence had been built around the property, so that the mine was in a good condition to stand a siege, for sheltered by the stockade a dozen resolute men well armed could "hold the fort" against a small army.

Mike Creegan, a tall, middle-aged, resolute-faced man, with sandy hair and a bushy beard of the same hue, was sitting by the gate to the stockade which faced toward the mining-camp—the Black Cloud property was on the outskirts of the town, about half a mile from the center—smoking a short, black pipe when the visitors approached.

The moment he perceived them Creegan sprang to his feet, said something to a man who was sitting on a box inside of the stockade, also puffing away industriously at a well-used pipe.

The man jumped up, grabbed two repeating-rifles which were leaning against the stockade near by, ran out and handed one of them to Creegan, and then in the coolest possible manner the two proceeded to take deliberate aim at the persons of the visitors.

They at once came to an abrupt halt.

The movement took them entirely by surprise.

"Howld on! phat are yez about?" cried the Irish lawyer in alarm, for he had lived long enough in this world to be extremely careful of his precious person.

"I reckon if you advance a step further I'll send you to argue a case before Old Nick," responded the miner, grimly; "not that I expect he would be glad to see you; for I don't believe even the devil would care to have such a rascal as you are in his domains."

"Don't act like a fool, Creegan!" cried Pendragon, white with rage at being thus threatened, but with a great effort controlling his temper.

"You know you wouldn't dare to fire."

"Wouldn't I?" the miner rejoined. "You advance and try it on then."

"Do you want to get yourself hung?" Pendragon asked.

"I reckon they ain't hanging men in this valley jest now for protecting their property," the other answered.

"Upon me wourd we do not intend to do you any damage, Mr. Creegan!" the lawyer exclaimed.

"Oh, no; I suppose not; only want to serve some leetle legal paper on me!" Creegan retorted. "But you can't do it! If either one of you come within a hundred feet of this gate I'll put a rifle-ball through you so quick that you will never know what hurt you."

"Nothing of the kind!" Pendragon cried. "I will give you my word for that. I have come to have a talk with you; that is all."

CHAPTER X.

THE CONFERENCE.

FROM the expression upon the faces of the two men it was plain that they had considerable doubt in regard to the truth of this statement, and therefore the lawyer thought it would be wise for him to say a few words.

"Upon me sacred honor, gentlemen, I assure yez that we haven't any idea of serving a scrap of a paper upon yez."

"We have come for the sake of having a little quiet chat, that's all, and there isn't the slightest necessity for yez to talk blood and murder."

"If I had any paper to serve, Creegan, I wouldn't be apt to come and serve it in person," Pendragon observed.

"I'm speaking nothing but the honest truth when I say that the sole reason which impelled me to visit the mine was to have a little quiet conversation with you."

"I don't come on warlike thoughts intent, and I haven't the slightest wish to engage in a personal quarrel with you. If you don't care to hear what I have to say, it's all right. I can't force you to listen, and I can go away, but I can tell you that in my opinion you are making a big mistake."

Creegan favored the millionaire with a searching glance, under which Pendragon bore up bravely.

He was conscious he was speaking the truth, and he did not fear inspection.

"Well, you look as if you were giving me a squar' deal this time, so I'll risk it," Creegan remarked, uncocking his gun and letting the butt come to the ground.

"But if you do try any gum-game, I give you fair warning it will be the worst day's work you ever put in, in all your life."

His companion followed his example with the gun and the visitors advanced, the Irish lawyer protesting:

"Upon me wourd of honor, gentlemen, you'll be affther finding that we have tould yez the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. It's a nate little quiet discussion we're after, nothing more."

"I'm always ready to talk when a man comes at me in the right way," the miner observed.

"Well, to come right down to business, I suppose you have heard I was 'held up' and robbed last night?" Pendragon said.

"Yes, some of the boys brought the news down last night, but I don't think I got all the particulars. Did you lose much?" Creegan asked.

"Very little; it wasn't any common road-agent that went for me."

"No?"

"No, sir, the fellow didn't want my money. All he was after was some valuable legal documents that I happened to have on my person."

"Well, that was queer," Creegan remarked, evidently astonished at the statement.

"An' those legal documents, Mr. Creegan, related to this Black Cloud property, do ye mind?" added the lawyer.

A peculiar expression passed over the face of the miner at this point. He began to have an idea of the motives which induced the two to pay him this unexpected visit.

"Now, Mr. Creegan, I'm going to talk right open and honest with you, and I hope you will not get offended at my remarks."

"Oh, go ahead; I begin to see what you are driving at," Creegan responded.

"One of the legal papers stolen from me last night was the bill of sale which I received from Thomas Blake of his interest in this mine."

"And mind ye, Mr. Creegan," the lawyer hastened to add. "Let me lay down the law to yez on that p'int."

"The destruction of the bill of sale doesn't weaken Mr. Pendragon's claim to the mine in the l'aste."

"The bill of sale was in existence, was seen by a dozen different people, who will be able to testify to it and all about it."

"Thin, too, the payment of the check, for which the bill of sale was given, can be proved, for I witnessed the transaction myself—"

"It's mighty funny that no one but you ever saw the check in the old man's hands," Creegan growled, for, to use his own expression, it al-

ways "riled" him when he came to talk the matter over.

"It is strange, sur, I will admit that," the lawyer replied. "But we can easily prove the existence of the check, for it was certified by the cashier of the First National Bank of Denver, and the money is held in that bank now, waiting for the presentation of the check."

"There's no gum-game about that, at all, at all!"

"Oh, I s'pose I can guess what you are coming at; you think I had some hand in that road-agent business last night!" Creegan exclaimed, impatiently. "I s'pose you think I put up the job to get at the bill of sale, thinking that if it was out of the way, it would upset your claim to the mine?"

"A man not used to the law might think so, you know," replied the Irishman, and the old fellow laughed as though he rather admired such a piece of sharp practice.

"Well, I reckon I know a heap sight better than that," the miner observed, "and as for having anything to do with that affair last night, I reckon I kin produce plenty of witnesses who will be able to swear that I didn't go outside the door of my cabin after eight o'clock last night."

"Oh, I know well enough that you wasn't the man who did the job," the millionaire remarked. "I should certainly have recognized you, although my assailant was thoroughly disguised, but for all that, if he had been a man with whom I was acquainted, I most certainly would have recognized him."

"The fact of the matter is, me dear Mr. Creegan, we had an idea that yez were after arranging the little job, thinking it would make yez solid in regard to Mr. Pendragon's claim to the mine. It was a mighty sharp trick, if the law hadn't happened to be ag'in' yez," observed the lawyer.

"I s'pose I might as well own right up that I reckon I shouldn't be a heap sight particular as to how I beat you, if I could get ahead of you anyway," the miner replied.

"But in this hyer matter you are barking up the wrong tree. I don't know any more 'bout that business last night than a child unborn, and then ag'in, although, as I said, I shouldn't be particular to a hair how I beat you in this fight so long as I come out the top dog in the long run, yet if I had 'a' gone for you in that canyon I would have been a heap sight more apt to tell you to draw your weapons and sail in, the best man to take the mine, than to come any road-agent trick, which is altogether out of my line."

"Then, fair and honest, you haven't got the bill of sale?" questioned Pendragon, promptly.

"Fair and honest, I haven't, and I must say, Mr. Pendragon, I reckon you must have a pretty poor opinion of me if you think I would try to work such a game as that."

"Oh, well, I didn't know but what you had found out you didn't have any show against me in this fight, and so was induced to try a short cut, 'cross lots as it were, to see if you couldn't put matters on a more equal footing," responded the millionaire, airily.

"Well, if it comes to that, I hain't found out yet that you were getting the best of the fight," objected Creegan, dryly.

"If so be as how this court knows herself, and she thinks she do, the advantage so far is on my side."

"I've got the mine, and I'm holding right on to her, and as far as I kin see ahead, I don't get my peepers onto anything that looks like letting go."

"Oh, Mr. Creegan, shure it's no use for you to talk that way!" O'Ballahoe exclaimed. "Phat can any common man do ag'in', Mr. Pendragon, here, wid eight or tin millions of dollars at his back?"

"See hyer, Mr. Lawyer-chap, money ain't everything in this world!" the miner exclaimed, "although I will allow that sometimes it is pesky powerful."

"But when money goes into a square up-and-down, give-and-take tussle with justice, justice, though she is blind, generally manages to get an under-hold and downs money in the end."

"I've got the mine, and as good fighting-men inside the works as can be scared up on this side of the footstool."

"Possession is nine points of the law—ain't that so, Mr. O'Ballahoe?"

"Sometimes, not always," responded the Irishman, with the air of a sage.

"Well, that's what you lawyers always say, and if you don't know, you ought to. I've got possession, and I mean to hold it."

"Suppose we get a court order for the property to be turned over into the hands of a third party while we fight the legal battle for it?" craftily suggested O'Ballahoe.

"You've got to serve that order on me first, and I calculate to make it unhealthy for any man to come within a hundred feet of this property with any such order in his possession," responded the miner, who had evidently been advised by able counsel.

"Oh, we kin do it by publication!" exclaimed the lawyer.

"No you can't, and if you could I'd fight the order."

"We'll raise a posse and storm the works!" cried Pendragon.

"I'm ready for that any time!" Creegan responded, promptly. "In a free fight I feel able to hold my own against an army, and the moment you call upon the sheriff for a legal force I'll go for an injunction."

"You don't own all the judges in Colorado yet, Mr. Pendragon, although you do seem to have old Jake McKinney hard and fast."

"You will regret this quarrel before you are through with it, and since you want war, blame yourself if you get your fill," Pendragon declared.

And then the millionaire retreated, followed by his jackal.

CHAPTER XI.

THE BELLE OF THE SAN LUIS VALLEY.

As the crafty Irishman had anticipated, the loss of the bill of sale made considerable trouble.

Judge Jake McKinney at Del Norte, the friend upon whose aid Pendragon counted to throw the mining property into the hands of a receiver, was loth to proceed unless he could see his way clear.

The judge was a noted character, a poor lawyer, and still poorer judge, but an excellent politician, and so he managed to keep his head above water, although suspected of practices corrupt enough to ruin almost any man.

The Colorado millionaire had been the judge's banker many a time, and McKinney was bound to serve him in all possible ways.

In person, McKinney was a stoutly-built man of forty-five, rather under the medium height, with a gross, sensual face.

As McKinney explained to the millionaire and his legal adviser:

"The bill of sale is an original document upon which I should be able to make a stand if my appointment of a receiver was contested."

"The law, as Mr. O'Ballahoe will tell, depends upon just such little quibbles."

"Of course it does," that able counselor observed, immediately. "Who makes the laws? Isn't two-thirds of the min that do it lawyers? Do you suppose that they are going to be fools enough for to make perfectly plain and simple laws that everybody would be after understanding?"

"Bad 'cess to me! where would the lawyers come in thin? Would you have thim starve jist to save expinse to the people at large?"

"You see, times are changing in Colorado," the judge explained. "We can't rush things through now as we used in the good old days."

"These infernal newspapers have got in the habit of poking their noses into everything, and they have been after me with a sharp stick for some time past, and I'm not anxious to do anything that will be apt to get me into hot water."

"My advice to you in this matter is to get a good body of picked men together, make a dash at the mine some time when they least expect it, and get possession; then you'll have this Creegan in exactly the same box that he has you now."

The millionaire shook his head.

"It will cost a deal of bloodshed I am afraid," he said. "This fellow is a determined man and on his guard; it will be almost impossible to surprise him."

"Then you must give open battle; it will be by far the easiest way. And if there are a few men killed what difference does it make?" asked the judge, coolly. "All the wise men tell us that there are too many men in the world now."

"You need not be afraid of any trouble with the law; where two parties fight over a mine, even if there are a few men killed in the skirmish it's only an unfortunate accident."

And this was all the satisfaction that the Silver King could obtain.

After the interview O'Ballahoe remarked that the judge was right about the matter.

"He's got himself into so much trouble lately that he's afraid to make a bold move," the lawyer said.

"The election takes place next fall, and as his time expires then he hopes to be able to run ag'in, and any scandal now would hurt him. That's the reason he's so tinder-hearted and apt to stick at trifles."

The millionaire was annoyed. He far preferred to reach the end he sought through the subtle machinery of the law rather than by open, brutal force.

But upon arriving at the hotel he found a message which changed the current of his thoughts.

Mrs. Bernardo Del Carmen was at her ranch in the San Luis valley, having just returned after a year's absence in Europe, and she begged that the millionaire would do her the honor to call upon her as soon as possible.

Bidding O'Ballahoe return to Blakeville and keep his eyes open for any fresh developments in the Black Cloud mine matter, Pendragon mounted his horse and attended by his body-guard, the dark-visaged Mungo Thompson, who called himself a Spaniard, but who looked more like a negro, set out for the ranch of the woman whom he adored.

It was a strange thing that this iron-hearted speculator who seemed indifferent to the usual

run of women should be so fascinated by the dusky-skinned belle of the San Luis valley.

The Spanish-American girl who had run in her childhood, barefooted, after the sheep in her native vale.

Who had grown into womanhood as proud, as beautiful and as untamable as the golden eagle which made its home amid the crags and peaks of the Lagarita or Sangre de Christo Mountains.

A strange destiny had been in store for the beautiful child, too.

She had grown up wild and free as the spring flowers on the Colorado plains, which nestled between the heaven-soaring mountains, but in spite of the wild life she had led, her education had not been neglected.

Her father had been a cultivated Spanish gentleman, who had been forced to seek a refuge amid the hills of Colorado on account of a wild blow, struck in the heat of passion, which proved fatal to the man upon whom it had fallen.

The mother, a beautiful woman, though far below the father in station, was a mild and gentle creature, who fairly idolized her charming child, and so it came about that Estelle had grown into womanhood, a spoiled beauty.

When she was eighteen, at a single blow she was bereft of both her parents, both father and mother being seized with a malignant fever and dying within a few hours of each other.

Her father was in the cattle business, and the great Californian cattle-king, General Bernardo Del Carmen, happened to be at the Spader Ranch at the time of the double calamity.

Exactly how it came about no one could tell, but all in the neighborhood were surprised one morning, only two months after the death of her parents, with the intelligence that Estelle Spader had been married to the old cattle-king, and had departed with him on a bridal tour.

All who knew the parties were at first amazed, but then, upon reflection, they came to the conclusion that there wasn't anything wonderful about the matter, for the girl was known to be one of the wildest and most eccentric creatures that ever existed, and it was the common remark that no one ought to be surprised at anything she might do.

Five years only did the old man enjoy his bride, and then grim death claimed him and the old cattle-king was gathered to his fathers leaving his wife his sole heir.

If she had sold herself to the old man for his money, as was commonly believed, he had scrupulously adhered to his part of the bargain.

The Spader Ranch was only a few miles off and it was reputed to be one of the finest places in Colorado, the old cattle-king having, after his marriage spent large sums of money upon the place, for, after roaming all over the world for a couple of years, seeing everything that was to be seen, the willful girl had suddenly decided she had rather live in Colorado than anywhere else.

Her will had been law to her doting husband ever since their marriage.

Arriving at the mansion, Pendragon was ushered into the presence of its mistress.

It was little wonder that cool, hard-headed men of the world lost their senses when exposed to the fascinations of this marvelous beauty.

She had been a lovely girl when budding into womanhood, but now that her charms were fully ripened—she was just twenty-four—and had had all the advantages that money could give, she had acquired a polish which made her fairly irresistible.

In figure she was tall and willowy, every movement the perfection of grace; her well-rounded form would not have illy compared with the finest female figure that the pencil of the artist ever drew or the sculptor's chisel cut out of the silent marble.

Her face was a perfect oval, the skin slightly tinged by the warm caresses of a southern sun, fringed by as lovely blue-black hair as ever a mortal boasted; the eyes were large, coal-black in their hue and full of liquid fire, the mouth as perfect as a rosebud, small, yet with full, pouting lips, concealing little, pearl-like teeth.

And about the girl was an air of pride which well became her style of beauty.

An artist searching for a model fit to pose for a Cleopatra, the dark-eyed Sorceress of the Nile, could not have found a better subject than this Colorado girl were he to search the wide world over.

She was reclining in an easy-chair, surveying with a listless air the distant peaks of the Lagarita Mountains, when the millionaire was admitted.

She smiled and languidly extended her little shapely hand to him, which Pendragon took and kissed with as much respect as though she had been an empress and he the lowliest of her followers.

"Ah, if I could only express to you the happiness I feel at once more beholding you," he said, with honeyed accents.

"I'm afraid I shouldn't believe you, for I know you of old," she replied. "You were always such a horrid flatterer."

"To flatter perfection is an impossibility!"

"I'm perfection, I suppose," and she laughed. "I declare, you are getting worse and worse." "If you only knew how I have counted the hours since you have been gone," and he sighed in an endeavor to appear like a disconsolate lover.

"Oh, yes, I shall have to believe that, of course. A man like you, with your wealth, who has only to pick and choose from a hundred beauties; but, by the way, I gave you a certain commission—did you execute it?"

"I regret to say I did not, and now it has become an impossibility, for the man, John Denver, is dead."

"Dead! John Denver dead?" and with a bound she was on her feet, trembling with excitement.

CHAPTER XII.

GETTING AT THE MYSTERY.

THE millionaire was amazed; never since he had known the girl had he ever seen her so excited.

She had always been so self-possessed, so indifferent to anything that transpired, that he had come to look upon her as a marble-like woman who would not be apt to give way to emotion except under very strange circumstances.

Yet now, upon learning of the death of the convict, this John Denver, about whom there certainly seemed to be some deep and dark mystery, she was agitated to her very heart's core.

Her face was white—the blood had forsaken her lips; she was trembling in every limb, and it was plain that but for the support of the chair, the back of which she tightly clutched with her hand, she would not be able to stand.

"Great heavens! Miss Del Carmen, what is the matter?" he exclaimed, in alarm, springing to his feet and approaching her with the idea of rendering assistance.

"It is nothing—nothing!" she cried, hoarsely, waving him back in an imperious manner, and then she sunk again into the easy-chair and covered her face with her hands as if to hide her emotion.

Pendragon resumed his seat and watched her in silence.

"What was the meaning of this strange excitement?" he asked himself.

Why should the news of the death of the friendless felon, shut up for the term of his natural life within Sing Sing's cold stone walls, so affect this haughty, self-willed beauty?

It was fully five minutes before the lady recovered her self-possession, removed her hands and looked her visitor again in the face, and even then her exquisite bosom still palpitated, her face was pale, and the color had not returned to her lips.

There was some strange mystery connected with this affair, and the thought came to Pendragon that if he could only succeed in discovering it, he might be placed in a position where he could bring this cold and cruel beauty to listen to his long-urged suit.

"If I had had any idea that this intelligence would have had such an effect upon you I would have been more careful about imparting it," he remarked, in his smoothest way.

"Oh, it doesn't matter. The shock was sudden, and I was not prepared for it, for that the man might die never entered into my calculations," she replied, with an indifference which if not real was extremely well assumed.

"It never occurred to me that you would be particularly interested in the man's fate, although from the mission that you intrusted to me I knew you were anxious to get him out of prison," he observed, cautiously feeling his way, burning with curiosity to get a clew to the mystery.

"Yes, I am a complete idiot, I believe, about some matters," she replied, drooping her dark eyes, and a regretful expression stealing over her face. "And I flatter myself, too, that I am so strong sometimes."

"Well, thank Heaven! the matter is ended now, and the weight is taken from my mind."

"But I don't really understand—"

"Why I should take an interest in this poor, miserable wretch?" she asked, surveying him with a peculiar look in her glorious eyes.

A look that, somehow, put him strongly in mind of a fire that he had once seen in the eyes of a wild-cat which he had brought to bay on a tree-trunk and which sprung boldly at him when it found that its escape was cut off, and had it not been for a well-aimed revolver-ball, there's no doubt he would have been well-scratched.

Was she being brought to bay now by his questions, and was she like the wild-cat preparing to fight unto death?

"Yes, of course—I trust you will pardon my question when you consider how great is the interest I feel in everything that relates to you in the slightest particular."

"Oh, yes; I suppose it is only natural," she remarked, sinking back in her chair again and relapsing into her former listless manner.

"The explanation is simple enough, and although I presume when you hear it that you will set me down as being the greatest fool of a woman that ever lived, yet if you are anxious to

know, I see no reason why I should conceal my motive."

"Ah, Mrs. del Carmen, you do me such a terrible injustice!" Pendragon exclaimed, with the air of a devoted lover.

"By this time you ought to be aware that you are perfection in my eyes."

"It does not matter what you do, I should believe you to be right though all the rest of the world declared it wrong."

"Where did you learn all these pretty speeches—on the stock exchange?" she asked with a light laugh.

"What is it that the fellow in the play says? 'He jests at scars that never felt a wound!'" Pendragon quoted.

"You are really an irrepressible fellow!" she exclaimed. "I do not wonder that you succeed in business. I never had any other man make love to me so persistently since I knew the meaning of the word," she observed, her lips curling slightly as though in disdain of the tender passion.

"That is the kind of man I am," he replied. "When I set my heart upon an object I do not allow myself to believe that there is such a word as fail."

"I suppose it was very stupid in me to take any interest in the fate of this unfortunate man," she remarked slowly, "but I am a creature of impulse, and have always been so from my earliest years. I do not believe he intended to commit murder, and have always felt sure that nothing but absolute want tempted him to enter the house on that dreadful night."

"That may be true, for the man did not appear to be a common ruffian."

"It seemed to me to be perfectly horrible that he should be imprisoned for life, and I had a morbid idea that in part I was responsible for the result."

"I know the thought was foolish, but I brooded over it constantly, but I did not see any way in which I could be of any assistance to the wretched man until one day you happened to declare you would do anything in the world to please me."

"Then it suddenly occurred to me that I might not only put your devotion to the test but also free the unfortunate prisoner from his lifelong confinement. Although the man was shut up in the State Prison I felt sure that a person of your wealth and influence would be able to accomplish the task, especially if you felt for me half of the esteem you pretended."

"You are quite right in regard to that. I would most certainly have fulfilled the commission!" Pendragon exclaimed, earnestly.

"I had a morbid desire too for the man to leave the country after his release. I did not want it to be within the bounds of possibility for me to ever look upon his face again, for it would only recall unpleasant memories, and I would rather give fifty thousand dollars than be tormented."

"You can see how foolish I am!" and the lady's proud lip curled in disdain, as though she was heartily ashamed of her own weakness.

"Oh, we all have our queer notions," the millionaire observed. "There's hardly a man or woman in the world but has a hobby."

"But why did you not write to me about this matter?"

"You forget that you laid strict injunctions upon me in regard to correspondence."

"You said you did not wish to be troubled with letters, and as your slightest whim is as law to me I did not write."

"Yes, yes, you are very good, I had forgotten all about that," she observed, listlessly.

"I do not think that I have ever forgotten a single word that you have been kind enough to bless me with!" he exclaimed, with all the ardor of a devoted lover.

The lady laughed outright. Sentiment seemed to be foreign to her nature.

"What a precious lot of silly trash you must have stored away in the store-house of your memory then!" she exclaimed.

"No one but you would say that!" he retorted.

"So the man's dead," she observed, reflectively. "Well, he is out of his misery then, and you were not afforded a chance to prove your devotion."

"No, but his death wouldn't have made any difference, for I would not have been able to accomplish the task anyway."

"I do not understand," said the lady, elevating her beautiful eyebrows in wonder.

"I went to the prison and saw the man just about six months before the time of his death."

"You did!" and a strange expression came over the features of Mrs. Del Carmen.

"Yes, through the kindness of a friend of mine, who is a great gun in New York politics, I was able to bring a certain amount of pressure upon the warden, and so secured a private interview with the convict."

"Go on!" cried the lady, in a feverish sort of way as the gentleman halted in his speech.

"I made the offer to him and he refused."

"Refused!" exclaimed the girl, again rising to her feet in her excitement, her eyes blazing with unnatural fires.

"Yes, he decidedly declined."

"And did you mention my name in the matter?—does he know that I was the one who instigated the offer?" she demanded, her face growing deathly pale, and she was trembling in every limb from excitement.

"Yes, I explained matters, of course," Pendragon answered. "You did not place any injunction of secrecy upon me."

"I told the fellow right out that you thought him to be no common robber and felt pity for him, and that as a reward for my services, if I secured his release, you were to marry me."

"That was the agreement, wasn't it?"

"Yes, yes, I believe so, but I did not dream that you would mention my name. I should have warned you," and she sunk back in the chair like a woman sick at heart.

"Well, as he's dead it doesn't make much difference," and then Pendragon related the story of how the convict had met his fate in attempting to escape, as detailed to him by the warden in his letter.

CHAPTER XIII.

A PROMISE.

THE face of the woman grew fairly rigid by the time the end of the story was reached, and the millionaire became alarmed, thinking she would faint.

"In Heaven's name, Estelle, what is the matter?" he cried. "Shall I not ring for your maid?" And he sprung to the table upon which the bell was placed.

"No, no, do not ring—it isn't anything—a passing faintness, that is all," she replied, faintly, motioning him with outstretched arm to desist from executing his purpose.

"Give me a glass of water, please; that is all I require."

He hastened to comply with her request, and after she had taken the cooling draught she seemed to be better.

"I am subject to these faint attacks," she explained, "and whenever I allow myself to become at all excited I am sure to bring on a faint spell."

"It is all over now, though. And this is the story of the man's death?"

"Yes; the warden of the State Prison at Sing Sing took the trouble to write me a full account of the affair."

"You see, he was not satisfied to remain in prison for the rest of his life, although he did refuse the offer I made him with considerable disdain."

"He took a desperate chance for liberty; fate was against him and he came to a miserable death."

"And do you believe that?" she exclaimed, abruptly, hard and ugly lines appearing about the corners of her beautiful mouth, while a baleful light shone in her dark eyes.

And as Pendragon looked at her, again the thoughts of the wild-cat at bay came into his mind, and, strange fact, he was none the less infatuated with her on account of this display of temper.

On the contrary, it rather increased his admiration.

If he had been asked to account for this, he would have replied that he liked women with a spice of Satan in them, far better than tame, gentle, doll-like creatures.

"Certainly! Why not?" he answered.

"It is not the truth!"

"I can show you the letter!"

"Oh, I do not mean that!" she cried, impatiently. "I do not doubt in the least that the warden wrote you to that effect."

"I can readily believe he thought he was stating the truth when he related how the convict met death in the waves while making a desperate effort to escape, but it is all false."

"The man is not dead!"

Pendragon was amazed, for such an idea as this had never entered his head. He had never questioned in the least the truth of the story.

"The man is not dead?" he repeated. "What reason have you to think so?"

"No reason at all, but it is the truth!"

"My dear Estelle, why do you speak so positively? What can you possibly know about the matter?"

"My instinct tells me that he is not dead!" she replied, instantly and with great vehemence.

"It was a clever trick to escape recapture."

"When the guard fired he dived and escaped the ball, swam under the water until he got out of sight, and then came to the surface," Mrs. Del Carmen exclaimed, and in a tone which plainly betrayed she had a perfect conviction she was describing the event exactly as it had occurred.

If she had been an eye-witness to the scene, and had beheld the escaping prisoner go through the movements she described, she could not have been more positive.

Pendragon shook his head.

He had not the least faith that anything of the kind had happened.

"My dear Estelle, I hope you will pardon me if I say that in this case I think you are letting your imagination run away with you."

"I am sure it is utterly impossible that the prisoner could have made his escape in the manner you describe."

"Immediate pursuit was given, and if he had escaped the ball by diving under water, as you imagine, the moment he came to the surface he would have undoubtedly been discovered by his pursuers.

"Besides, you seem to forget that the warden expressly states in his letter that the body of the convict was found on the opposite bank of the river about ten miles below the prison a short time afterward."

"A trick—a trick to baffle pursuit and make all the world believe he was dead!" the lady exclaimed, excitedly.

"That is easily said, but not so easy to prove," he replied.

"The body was identified, of course, by the prison officers, and the warden distinctly says that an examination of the remains disclosed the fact that the ball from the guard's rifle had passed clear through the man's body, so that the wound must have produced almost instant death."

"It is not true!" she declared; "that man has escaped, and he is alive! I know that it is only my instinct that tells me so, but that instinct has never yet deceived me, and I would rather trust to it than to anything else in the world."

"The body that was found was not his, but the remains of some poor wretch whom accident threw in his way. He stripped the clothes from the man and replaced them with his own prison garb."

"Thus he was enabled not only to escape, but to deceive every one into the belief he had perished, for the finding of the body, of course, seemed conclusive proof."

Pendragon laughed; he was amused at the idea.

"Really, Estelle, you possess great talents in a certain line, and I confess I never suspected anything of the sort," he remarked.

"You ought to go into fiction. From this little specimen of your powers that you have favored me with just now, I think it is safe to say you could hold your own with any novelist living."

"It isn't fiction, it is the truth," she replied with such an air of conviction that Pendragon perceived it would be a clear waste of time to attempt to argue her out of her belief.

"Well, a willful woman will have her own way, they say, so I will waste no time in trying to make you believe the ideas you have in regard to this matter are utterly absurd."

"That is right, and you are a dear, good fellow for letting me have my own way," and she favored her admirer with one of her most bewitching smiles.

"And now you can do me a service, that is, if you do not think it is too much trouble."

"Too much trouble!" he exclaimed, reproachfully. "Why, Estelle, you ought to know me better than to even suggest that any service you might call for at my hands would be too much trouble."

"Speak freely, what is it?"

"Find out for me all the particulars of this affair. Ascertain if the body was identified, and if the warden of the prison was perfectly satisfied it was the body of the prisoner."

"But that point is immaterial!" she added, abruptly. "For it doesn't matter whether he is satisfied or not. I know the man is alive."

"No, no, Estelle, don't put it quite so strongly as that," he hastened to say. "You don't really know the man is alive, you only imagine that it is so."

"Assume that I am correct in my belief, and act accordingly. I want you to find the man for me, no matter what it costs!" she exclaimed, her face firm in determination.

"Certainly; I will gladly undertake the task, and until I ascertain beyond the shadow of a doubt that the fellow is dead, I will act on your theory that he is alive."

"And I promise you that no half-way measures will be adopted, either. I will not spare either trouble or money."

"The best detectives in the East shall be employed!"

"To search there?" she inquired, abruptly.

"Yes, you may rely upon my leaving no stone unturned."

"At the East you may be able to discover whether the man perished in the river or escaped, as I believe, but you will not be able to find him, even though he is alive," she remarked in a tone of conviction.

"Oh, yes, I will, you can rely upon my discovering him if he is alive, no matter how carefully he may conceal himself," Pendragon replied, instantly.

"If he is alive, you will not find him in the East although you employ all the detectives in the world."

"Here in Colorado is where you must look."

The millionaire glanced at the lady inquiringly.

Again he seemed to be approaching the heart of the mystery.

"Why should you think he will come here?" he asked. "What reason have you for such a supposition?"

"Oh, my dear Mr. Pendragon, haven't you dwelt long enough in this odd world to know that you mustn't ask a woman to give reasons?"

she exclaimed with a sort of feverish gayety that seemed to be plainly forced.

"A woman is a creature of impulse, who acts upon instinct and the spur of the moment."

"I know I am right about this matter, but don't bother me about reasons."

"This man is probably here now, in disguise, of course, waiting for my return, so do your best to discover him, but I will wager you anything you like that I find him first!"

Pendragon hardly knew what to make of this strange affair and to save explanation hereafter we will state here that when he wrote to the warden for the full particulars of the death of the convict, touching particularly upon certain points that Mrs. Del Carmen mentioned, the letter of the official confirmed in every respect the statements she had made.

The body was fully identified by the prison garb and the bullet-wound made by the sentry's rifle, although the face was disfigured beyond recognition.

The convict had no particular marks upon his person, but in all respects the body found exactly seemed to resemble the body of the felon.

It was plain that the warden had not the least doubt about the matter. He was sure the man was dead.

CHAPTER XIV.

IN A TRAP.

AFTER promising to do all in his power to get at the truth of the matter, Pendragon rose to depart, but the lady would not listen to such a thing until after dinner.

An humble repast Mrs. Del Carmen termed it, but the millionaire, who was considerable of an epicure, and rather prided himself upon the way in which he lived, was of the opinion that the "spread" was equal to anything of the kind he had taken part in for some time.

Mrs. Del Carmen's cook was superb, the viands choice and the wine selected with special care.

And Pendragon knew all about wines. He was a judge, if his word was to be taken with implicit credit.

All these "self-made" men who begin on beer and whisky and gradually rise to the dignity of the "drink divine," generally think it necessary to assume to know all about costly wines, for fear that the world at large will think them to be nothing more than common folks instead of true blue-blooded noblemen.

So it was about nine o'clock before the millionaire set out to return to Del Norte.

After the repast was ended he had chatted for quite a time with the hostess, who was unusually gracious, and therefore Pendragon departed in decidedly high spirits.

The road was a lonely one from the Del Carmen Ranch to the town of Del Norte, but that fact did not worry the millionaire in the least.

His trusty attendant, Mungo Thompson, was with him, armed to the teeth, and Mungo was a man of proven courage, too, well skilled in the use of weapons, and altogether an ugly customer to tackle.

Pendragon, too, was armed, and he rather prided himself upon his skill as a pistol-shot, so he journeyed along the lonely road without the slightest fear that he would be molested.

He rode on for quite a time in silence, busy in thought, trying to find some reason for the strange interest that the beautiful belle of the St. Luis valley manifested in the mysterious Eastern felon.

"Her explanation is not at all satisfactory," Pendragon muttered to himself as he rode along, his companion discreetly keeping a little in the rear. "I am satisfied that she has not told me the truth about the matter."

"In fact she is as deep and unfathomable as a bottomless pool, and although at present she appears to be favorably disposed toward me, yet it may be that she is only fooling me."

Now that the millionaire was removed from the magnetism exerted by the spoiled beauty, he could calmly reason upon the subject, but when he was in her presence, her personal fascinations completely led him captive.

"If I could only manage to discover why it is that she takes such an interest in this mysterious man, it is possible I would be able to secure a hold on her," he mused.

"It is worth the trial, and a few hundred dollars invested in some Eastern detectives to look into the matter might pan out extremely well."

"I must be careful, though, not to let my divine beauty discover my game, for it would be certain to mortally offend her, and then goodbye to all chances of my ever becoming her lord and master."

"She carries it with a high hand now, but once let me become her husband and she will very soon discover the difference between such a man as I am and that poor old dolt of a general."

It was a pleasant night for a ride, for the air was balmy and the temperature delightful.

The way led through as lovely a plain as the State of Colorado possessed.

Afar in the distance rose the foot-hills of the neighboring mountains, and the moon was just

making her appearance from behind the distant peaks.

Here and there the plain was dotted with little groves, covering an acre or so of space.

Through the largest one of these groves the trail ran, and when the two riders got into the thickest of the grove they found themselves plunged into utter darkness, for the ample foliage of the trees shut out the light of the rising moon.

It was so dark that the riders could not distinguish the trail, but their well-trained animals proceeded without hesitation.

The contrast between the pleasant prairie and the heart of the desolate wood was so great that the millionaire could not forbear a remark in regard to it.

"What do you think of this, Mungo?" he asked. "Is this about the darkest place you ever got into?"

"Pretty dark, sir, but it only lasts a few hundred feet."

"Yes, I am aware of that. This would be a capital place for a road-agent to lie in wait," Pendragon suggested. "No traveler would ever discover the presence of the scamp until ordered to hold up his hands."

"That's hardly travel enough, sir, over this trail to make it worth any one's while to try that game," Mungo replied.

"Yes, that's very true; the game wouldn't be hardly worth the candle."

No sooner had the words escaped from the lips of Pendragon when a peculiar swishing sound came to his ears, followed by a low moan of pain, and then Thompson fell from the saddle to the ground, and his horse, startled by the occurrence, bounded past Pendragon and ran rapidly through the wood.

The millionaire was at a loss to account for this strange occurrence, but his first surmises were that the man had either struck his head against the projecting limb of a tree or else had been seized by a fit.

"Hello! what's the matter, Mungo?" he exclaimed.

No answer being returned by the man, the millionaire came to the natural conclusion that Thompson had been seriously hurt.

"What the deuce is the matter with him?" Pendragon continued, utterly at a loss to account for the strange incident.

He had a box of wax matches in his pocket—he was an inveterate smoker—and he lost no time in getting it out and striking a light.

The blaze of the match lit up the darkness of the night.

Thompson lay on his side in the road, perfectly insensible.

"Well, of all the strange things that ever happened!" Pendragon exclaimed, as he gazed upon the senseless man, turning his horse as he spoke and riding to where Thompson lay.

"It will not do to leave him here in this state," he continued.

Pendragon dismounted and fastened his horse to one of the trees which stood near to the spot where Thompson had fallen.

By this time the match had burned out.

Lighting another he knelt by the side of the senseless man and examined him.

Thompson was in a dead faint, and for a moment the millionaire feared that life was extinct, but a close inspection revealed that the heart was still beating, although but faintly.

"Well, he's not dead, anyhow," Pendragon muttered; "but what on earth is the matter with the man?"

If Thompson had been struck and stunned by a protruding branch of a tree there surely would be some mark left by the blow, but as far as Pendragon could see the man was not injured in any way.

"Hang me if this isn't about the strangest thing that I ever ran across," the millionaire murmured.

By this time the match had burned down to the end, and as Pendragon drew out another from the case, with the idea of seeing if he could not rouse the senseless man, he suddenly became conscious that something was standing behind him.

He had not heard it approach—he could not tell whether it was a beast or a human, but he was sure there was something there, and although Pendragon was far from being a coward, yet for a moment he was startled.

It is the unknown danger that always terrifies.

Then to the ears of the listening man came a sound like the rustle of a garment in the air, and immediately afterward a soft light pervaded the spot.

It was not the first time that this peculiar soft light had fallen upon the eyes of the millionaire, and a bitter curse rose to his lips.

Too late, he realized his position—too late he understood that he had fallen into a trap, and bitterly he cursed the folly which had induced him to act so incautiously.

He felt that he was in the toils, and for a moment he was stupefied like a man stunned by a heavy blow.

Then, all of a sudden realizing that if he intended to struggle against the misfortune which had overtaken him there was no time to be lost,

he clapped his hand upon one of the revolvers belted to his waist.

But hardly had his fingers touched the butt of the weapon, when a heavy hand was laid upon his shoulder and a cold substance, which he immediately conjectured to be the muzzle of a pistol, was placed against the back of his head and a resolute voice said:

"Don't attempt to draw your revolver, Larry Pendragon, or I shall be under the unpleasant necessity of drilling a hole through your skull!"

He was in the hands of The Unknown of Hell's Canyon!

CHAPTER XV.

THE ROAD-AGENT'S GAME.

"QUITE a surprise-party, eh, my noble duke?" cried the disguised man, in the same harsh, rasping tones that he had used on the occasion of his previous interview with the millionaire, and which Pendragon felt sure were assumed so that his voice could not be recognized.

"I reckon I am about the last man that you expected to see," continued the Unknown, "and I think I would be perfectly safe in betting a big stake that, if you had any say-so in the matter, we two wouldn't be holding this nice, quiet little confab here at this moment."

"Don't fool with that revolver!" the stranger cried, abruptly, as Pendragon's nervous fingers toyed with the butt of the weapon.

"I should hate like thunder to kill you, for upon my word and honor as a gentleman you are worth a deal more to me alive than dead, but I'm an awful impatient man sometimes, awful rash and headstrong and mighty liable to do rash things when the humor seizes upon me."

With a muttered curse Pendragon relinquished his hold upon the pistol and turning, impatiently, faced his captor.

As he had anticipated, it was the mysterious Unknown with the deathlike face, from whence shone the strange light, which gave him such an unearthly appearance.

He was dressed precisely the same as before, and the millionaire, surveying him with eager curiosity, could not divest himself of the belief that this mysterious road-agent was no stranger to him, but at some time in the past—some time quite remote, as near as he could get at it—he had been on familiar terms with him.

Rapidly then in his mind Pendragon strove to recall to memory recollections of men upon whose toes he had trampled rudely in the past—men who would be apt to harbor resentment and would gladly jump at an opportunity to do him harm, for the millionaire was a hard fighter and dealt the men who had the misfortune to get in his way terrible blows, and those unfortunate souls who were unlucky enough to be ground into the dust by his chariot-wheels declared that he did not know the meaning of the word mercy.

Pendragon's memory, although a most excellent one, was at fault in this case.

He could not place the Unknown.

"Don't swear; you won't catch any fish," observed the footpad.

"Take it easy, or, if you can't take it easy, take it as easy as you can—ha! ha! ha!" and hollow and grimly the laugh sounded.

"What do you want with me?" demanded the millionaire, impatiently.

"Not much."

"In that case it seems to me that you are taking a good deal of trouble for nothing. I suppose you have killed my man, and if you have it may go hard with you one of these days."

Despite the fact that he knew he was absolutely in the power of the Unknown, Pendragon could not refrain from exhibiting his anger although knowing full well that a display of temper would not benefit him in the least.

A guttural laugh came from the lips of the road-agent, his contempt for the threat being plainly expressed.

"Oh, he's worth a dozen dead men," he replied. "I only hit him a little clip with the soft end of a hard club as he rode by me in the darkness; sand-bagged him, in fact, and I flatter myself that I worked the job to the queen's taste, for you hadn't the least suspicion that he had been foully dealt with."

"But come; I can't afford to stand chinning here all night with you. We must get down to work right away; I'm old business, I am, and don't you forget it."

"I thought you said you didn't want much of me?" the millionaire remarked.

"No more do I."

"You wouldn't get much if you did. I can tell you that for a sure enough fact."

"I hav'n't got any valuable documents with me this time, and my pocket-book is so well cleaned out that it looks as if an elephant had walked over it," Pendragon said, affecting a light and cheerful manner, which was far from being a true index to his feelings.

"Hard lines, old man, for a cuss like yourself worth fifty or sixty millions," the road-agent observed, with a grin. "Durn me if it wasn't for the appearance of the thing if I wouldn't loan you a hundred or two to kinder help you on your way, but then I reckon you've got your check-book with you."

"Oh, no, I hav'n't," and Pendragon smiled

sarcastically, for he fancied he had discovered the little game that the foot-pad was up to.

"Not much, I hav'n't, my friend," he continued. "I don't as a general rule go meandering around the country with my check-book in my pocket, so if you worked this surprise-party on that idea you will be most beautifully left."

"Oh, no; I tell you, Larry Pendragon, it is a cold day when I get left," the road-agent replied. "Your check-book don't interest me in the least, but I really do feel considerable curiosity about your hand-writing."

"My hand-writing!" exclaimed the millionaire, amazed at this statement.

"Yes; I reckon I never had the chance to see what kind of a fist you write, and I s'pose you'll think I'm trying to stuff you with a pretty tough story when I say that I have taken all this trouble to-night just for the pleasure of getting a specimen of your hand-writing."

"It is rather a strange idea," Pendragon remarked, totally at a loss to guess what trick the man had in his mind, for, of course, he was aware that there was some "game" about the matter.

"Yes; I'm kinder an odd, queer cuss, you kin bet high on that; I've taken a good deal of trouble to secure this little interview with you, jest to have the pleasure of getting a line or two of your hand-writing; so whip out your patent pen—for I want the thing in ink—and your memorandum-book. You see, I'm going to let you off in the easiest kind of a way."

"So I perceive," responded the millionaire, dryly; but in his own mind he did not feel so sure in regard to the matter, for he knew very well that there was some deep game afoot, although as yet he had not been able to guess what it was.

Being completely in the power of the Unknown he had no other course open to him but to yield obedience to his commands.

So he took out his book and stylograph pen, and prepared to write.

"Now I want you to fix it up in first-class Eastern style," the road-agent remarked. "No backwoods or prairie dug-out business about it."

"Write on the top line the town and date, Del Norte, you know."

Pendragon complied, the other watching him the while as eagerly as the cat the mouse which it destined for its prey.

"You write a mighty good hand," commented the road-agent.

"It's as plain as kin be. I reckon almost anybody could read it, though it ain't handsome; you don't use any curlicues or fancy touches; quite an uncommon fist, I must say."

"Yes, any one who has ever seen my writing is not apt to forget it."

"Tain't a hand that can be easily imitated, either."

"That is true enough."

"It's jest a splendid hand! I tell you, boss, you don't know how glad I am that I took it into my head to git you to give me a sample of it."

"Have you got the town and date down all right?"

"Yes."

"Now write in a separate line under, you know, in tip-top style:

"To Mendoza Brothers, bankers, Santa Fé."

"Hallo, hallo, what are you up to?" demanded Pendragon, suspiciously.

"Never you mind, jest you write; that is all you've got to do."

"And suppose I refuse?" exclaimed the millionaire, angrily.

"It won't be healthy for you to refuse, for I'll put a ball through you in a twinkling," the road-agent replied, sternly. "You can bet your bottom dollar, Larry Pendragon, that I mean business, every time."

The millionaire was in the toils; he was helpless in the power of the Unknown, and there was something in the man's manner which convinced the Colorado King he would not hesitate for a moment in carrying out his threat if provoked by resistance.

So without a word Pendragon wrote as requested.

The Mendoza Brothers, of Santa Fé were the leading bankers of the Southwest, men with whom the millionaire held intimate business relations.

"Now write: 'Please deliver to bearer the tin box marked with my name which is in your safe, and oblige, yours truly, Lawrence Pendragon,'" commanded the Unknown.

A dark look came over the face of the millionaire, and he hesitated.

Up came the revolver of the road-agent.

"Write, or that tin box will be of more interest to your heirs than to you!" he cried.

Thus threatened, the millionaire wrote as he was directed, although sorely against his will.

The other watched him with the eyes of a hawk.

"Good, you're a bully boy!" the road-agent exclaimed, when the task was done.

"I reckon I will have to remember you in my prayers."

"So long!"

And the Unknown, carefully folding up the paper, began to back away.

"There are only worthless legal papers in the box!" Pendragon exclaimed.

"How about the five hundred thousand dollars' worth of bonds?" cried the marauder, and then with a hoarse laugh of triumph he disappeared in the thicket, and again the spot was plunged into utter darkness.

Pendragon started like a man who had received an electric shock.

The statement of the stranger was correct in every particular.

The tin box—a small tin trunk, to speak correctly—in the safe of Mendoza Brothers at Santa Fé, did contain United States bonds worth five hundred thousand dollars.

And he had given the road-agent an order for the box.

This was by far the boldest game that had ever come to the millionaire's knowledge.

How on earth did the man learn that the bonds were in the trunk? It was a mystery, if ever there was one.

"But, thanks to the telegraph, I reckon I will be able not only to beat his game, but to lodge my gentleman in jail!" Pendragon cried.

CHAPTER XVI.

PENDRAGON TAKES ACTION.

THANKS to the electric wires, which the road-agent had evidently not taken into his calculations, Pendragon felt sure he could beat the foot-pad at his own game.

At the time of which we write neither railroad nor telegraph had reached Del Norte.

Both "Iron Horse" and "Magic Wire" had halted at Alamosa after crossing the Rio Grande, as if the task of jumping the stream had fatigued them so as to render a rest necessary before further progress could be made.

The road-agent's game was clear, so Pendragon thought.

The job had evidently been carefully planned, and it was more than probable that there was a gang engaged in the affair.

There was almost a straight road from Alamosa southward to Santa Fé.

The road-agent either had relays of horses stationed along the road at convenient points, so that he would be able to get fresh mounts and so distance pursuit, after the fashion of the pony-express riders, or else there were not only fresh horses but fresh men as well, the order for the delivery of the box being passed from hand to hand until Santa Fé was reached.

In either case the millionaire felt sure he would not be able to overtake the rascal or arrive in Santa Fé in time to prevent the order from being honored.

But by the aid of the electric spark the clever scheme of the road-agent could be easily defeated.

All that was necessary for Pendragon to do was to go to Alamosa and from there send a dispatch to Mendoza Brothers at Santa Fé, notifying them of what had occurred and instructing them to have officers in readiness to arrest whoever should present the order.

And as Alamosa was quite near at hand, compared to Santa Fé, the old Mexican town being about three times as far, there wasn't the least doubt that Pendragon could reach the telegraph there long before the road-agent and his allies could get to their destination and secure the rich prize for which they had so skillfully plotted.

From Del Norte to Santa Fé by way of Taos was roughly estimated to be somewhere about two hundred miles.

Nearer a hundred and eighty than two hundred some of the old settlers declared.

Sixty leagues the Mexican travelers were wont to call it, and as a league is about equal to three English miles the estimate which gave the distance at one hundred and eighty was probably correct.

With frequent change of horses, provided the steeds were good ones, the distance might be accomplished in two days, if there were also relays of messengers as well as animals, or a single rider if he was a man of iron like the old-time pony-express messengers, might be able to cover the distance in that time.

"With the aid of the electric spark I shall have plenty of time to warn the Mendozas, and when this mysterious road-agent presents his order instead of delivering to him my tin trunk with the United States bonds, they will have an officer in readiness to snap a pair of handcuffs upon his wrists," mused the millionaire.

And then a sudden idea occurred to him which caused him to clap his hands together in a joyous manner.

"By Jove! I didn't think of that before!" he exclaimed, abruptly.

"This fellow is the man that got the documents from me in Hell's Canyon."

"Now if I get him behind the bars at Santa Fé the chances are a hundred to one that I can bring him to a settlement."

"When he finds that I have him foul he will be apt to endeavor to square matters with me."

"If he has the plunder he will probably be willing to hand it over on condition of being released, and if he has turned it over to other

parties he will be tempted to turn informer and make a clean breast of it. When a man like this fellow gets into a hole he is almost certain to squeal the moment he discovers he is in a trap.

"And if through him I can get at the man or men who put up the job on me, my name is not Larry Pendragon if I don't make them sweat for it."

"Of course there's only one man at the bottom of the whole business, and that is that infernal Mike Creegan."

"If I could only succeed in proving that he had a hand in these outrages—that he was the instigator, so I could land him in jail, I would gladly give a thousand or two in hard cash!"

"Who knows but what this little affair to-night may turn out to be the luckiest thing for me that has happened for a long while?"

A groan from his man Mungo at this moment interrupted the current of Pendragon's thoughts.

"Well, it's plain that he's not dead!" the millionaire exclaimed, as he groped his way in the darkness to where his follower was extended upon the ground.

"Oh, what a lick that was!" Mungo exclaimed, as Pendragon came up to him.

The millionaire struck a match, and by its light Mungo was revealed sitting up and rubbing his head, while a doleful expression appeared upon his face.

"Are you badly hurt?" Pendragon asked.

"I guess not, although I got an awful blow on the head," the man replied, rising to his feet. "What was it, anyway?"

"A road-agent attack; the fellow downed you and then he paid his respects to me; but if you are able to walk, let's get on and get out of this place."

By this time the match had burnt out.

"Oh, yes, I'm all right now; I'm strong enough on my legs, although I've got a mighty bad pain in my head."

"Come on then; I reckon we can manage to grope our way through the darkness."

The millionaire was correct in this conjecture, and in ten minutes' time the two emerged from the wood and came out on the open prairie.

It was only about a mile to the town of Del Norte, the lights of which could be plainly discerned in the distance, and in a quarter of an hour Pendragon and his man walked into the hotel where the millionaire had his headquarters when business brought him to Del Norte.

The horses of the two, with that sagacity so common to well-trained and high-bred steeds, had managed to find their way to the hotel, arriving about ten minutes before their masters.

And the hotel people were in the throes of wonder as to the reason of the appearance of the riderless horses, when Pendragon and his man came up.

"Our beasts took French leave of us," Pendragon remarked, as he swung himself into the saddle, Mungo following his example.

Pendragon did not think that it was advisable to mention what had occurred.

To relate the particulars of his encounter with the road-agent would only take up time, and there wasn't any particular benefit to be derived from making the adventure public, as far as he could see.

"Are you off to-night?" asked the landlord.

"Yes; but I shall probably be back, although I may not get in until to-morrow. I've a little business to look after up toward South Fork, and it may detain me a while. So long!"

And away the two rode.

South Fork was in exactly the opposite direction to the one which Pendragon intended to pursue, but the millionaire was one of those careful, cautious men who would not let his left hand know what the right was doing if he could help it.

The road-agent might have confederates in Del Norte, and if he allowed the fact to become known that he had set out for Alamosa, suspicion might immediately be excited that he meant to use the telegraph to warn the bankers at Santa Fé.

So westward from Del Norte the two rode; but when they were clear of the town, they made a wide circle around it and headed eastward down the Rio Grande.

Both of the horses were excellent ones and in good trim for such an expedition, and the distance was covered in good time.

The railroad agent was roused from his slumbers, and Pendragon made known his wish to open immediate communication by telegraph with Santa Fé.

"Can't do it, boss," the agent replied. "The young feller that runs the telegraph machine is down on his back with fever, and he couldn't work the thing to save him."

"The company said they would send a man to take his place, and I expected him in to-night, but he didn't show up."

A bitter oath rose to the lips of the millionaire. It was a check to his king on the first move.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE PURSUIT.

NEVER in all his life had the great Silver King been more annoyed than when this unwelcome intelligence was made known to him.

"What in blazes do the company mean by attempting to run a railroad in this one-horse fashion?" the millionaire demanded, savagely.

"You run trains over the road, don't you? or, maybe, you make your passengers walk from station to station!"

Now the agent did not feel particularly good-humored, for he did not at all relish being aroused from his slumbers in this unceremonious fashion, and not being acquainted with the millionaire, was not inclined to stand any "sarse" from him.

"Say, I reckon you better buy out the road and run it to suit yourself, seeing as how you are so durned particular," he responded.

"I'd do it in a moment if the 'plant' was worth anything," Pendragon answered, instantly. "But I reckon I'm not soft enough to invest in a line which only consists of two streaks of iron rust and the right of way."

"Well, hang me! if you ain't about the loudest-talking man that I have run across in a dog's age!" the agent exclaimed. "Why, stranger, you couldn't put on more style if you owned this hull durned town!"

"I reckon I'm able to buy about a dozen towns like this if I choose to invest in such trash," the millionaire rejoined.

"Who may you be, anyway?" asked the man, impressed by the commanding manner of the other.

"My name is Pendragon—"

"Larry Pendragon!" cried the agent in amazement, for by reputation the great Silver King was not unknown to him.

"That's my name, young man; you hit it right the first time; count one bull's-eye for you."

The agent was all attention and civility now, for Larry Pendragon was not a man to be treated with disrespect.

"I hope, boss, you'll excuse me for speaking so pertly to you, but we have so many fresh customers coming round hyer putting on airs that we have to be kinder sarcy or else we wouldn't have any peace of our lives," he explained.

"Oh, that's all right," the millionaire responded, in his bluff, off-hand way. "No offense in the world, I assure you; but I'm in a hobble here, and I want you to help me out if you can."

"I'll be glad to do anything I can for you."

"But I don't understand about this telegraph business. Ain't you running trains over the road?"

"Oh, yes."

"How can you run them on a single track without a telegraph?"

"Easily enough; there's only one train a day each way; in fact, only one train, for she leaves here at five in the morning, and comes back from Cuchara at five in the afternoon, so thar ain't much danger of a collision."

"Is there no way by which I can get a dispatch through to Santa Fé?" Pendragon asked.

"I don't really see how the trick can be done, boss," replied the man with a dubious shake of the head. "The telegraph sharp ain't no good at his key as long as he is wrestling with this fever."

"I'd give a hundred dollars to get a dispatch through to Santa Fé!" the millionaire exclaimed.

This liberal offer caused the railroad official to open his eyes.

A hundred dollars for a message was a trifle ahead of time.

"He couldn't do it, boss!" the man declared.

"A thousand dollars wouldn't be any temptation. He's right down on the flat of his back and 'bout half the time is as crazy as a bed-bug."

"But is he the only man in the town that understands telegraphing?" Pendragon inquired.

"Surely in a place as big as this there must be a stray telegrapher lying around loose."

"Durned if thar ain't!" the station-agent cried, abruptly. "I never thought of it until you spoke; but thar's a galoot in town who let on to me once that he was a boss telegrapher. Mebbe he wasn't giving it to me straight, though. He's a tumbler-juggler at the Metropolitan saloon."

"A barkeeper?" observed the Silver King.

"Yes, and he kin sling the fluids around as well as any man I ever see'd ahind a bar. If he's as good at a telegraph key, you don't want to tie to a better man."

"How soon do you suppose you can get him here?" Pendragon asked, impatiently.

"Oh, right away; the Metropolitan is an all-night place, always open, you know; it's just across the way, and I can get him to run over without any trouble, for he's a right nice kind of a cuss."

"Jest you wait hyer, and I'll have him over in a brace of shakes!"

And the depôt master caught up his hat and hurried out.

The conversation had taken place in the shanty which served as a depôt, and in one corner of which the railroad agent had a bunk, while the telegraphic instrument occupied another corner.

"Mighty strange!" the millionaire muttered

to himself. "I wonder if this infernal scoundrel who has set out to skin me, knew that the telegrapher was laid up, and calculated that I wouldn't be able to send a message?"

"I'd give a hundred dollars if O'Ballahoe was here. He's just the man to devise some way to get out of a hole of this kind."

The millionaire had become accustomed, in all difficult cases, to rely upon the shrewd wits of the Irishman.

The station agent was as good as his word, and in five minutes' time returned, bringing with him a thick-set, rather flashily dressed individual, who nodded respectfully to the millionaire, having evidently been informed by his companion in regard to Pendragon's identity.

"Mister Jim Smith, Mr. Larry Pendragon," said the depôt master, introducing the barkeeper.

"Jimmy, hyer, says he kin send a message as well as any man that ever tapped a key."

"Oh, yes, I ain't forgot my old biz," said Mr. Smith, in a confident tone.

"I'll give a hundred to get a message through to Santa Fé!" Pendragon remarked.

"Oh, that's all right, Mr. Pendragon; I won't charge you a cent as far as I am concerned," the other replied, magnanimously. "Glad to have the chance to oblige a man like you. Mebbe I might want a favor one of these days."

"I'll do my best to oblige you, but get the message through as soon as you can, as it is important."

"I'll do the best I kin," and the barkeeper seated himself at the instrument.

"I've got to 'call' Cuchara, for the operator there will have to take in from me and then send by the way of El Moro and Trinidad; this is only a branch line, you know."

"Yes, yes, go ahead."

The operator began, tapping the key in that—to the bystander—apparently random way common to the masters of the instrument.

After a minute or so of this proceeding the man wheeled about in his chair and shook his head.

"What's the matter?" asked Pendragon, anxiously, comprehending that something was wrong.

"Nary Santa Fé will you reach to-night over this line," answered the operator.

"Why not?"

"The wire is down somewhere along the line—in contact with the ground, and won't work."

"Are you sure?" cried the millionaire, amazed at this intelligence.

"Oh, yes, there isn't the least doubt about it. Locating such a thing as this used to be my best holt when I was in the business, and I never had to take a back seat for any man I ever saw. The wire is in contact with the ground, and nary message can get through until it is fixed."

"It is cut, perhaps?" blurted out Pendragon, impulsively.

"Like as not," the other responded indifferently, for to him the fact that the wire had parted bore no particular meaning.

"Such things will happen, you know; a tree may have been blown down and fallen across the wire and so smashed the consarn."

"Yes, a tree," muttered the millionaire between his clinched teeth, but in his heart he felt sure that it was not a tree that had tampered with the line.

The road-agent had calculated that the electric spark might be utilized to warn the banker at Santa Fé not to give up the valuable tin trunk, and had either cut the wire himself, or employed a confederate to do the trick.

"Isn't there any way to get a message through?" Pendragon exclaimed, beginning to get excited, for the idea of being fleeced by this audacious road-agent was galling in the extreme.

"Can't you find out where the break is in the wire and have it fixed?"

"Not much," responded the other; "why, the darned thing may be twenty miles off. It will take a regular lineman to put it in working order."

"I'd give a thousand dollars rather than not get the message through!" the millionaire declared.

This announcement did not produce any particular impression, for neither one of the men credited the statement.

The citizens of the Great Wild West are so given to extravagant assertions that their sayings must always be taken with due caution.

"The best way for you to do, Mr. Pendragon, is to take the morning train to Cuchara, and telegraph from there," said the depôt master.

After considerable deliberation the millionaire came to the conclusion that this was the only thing to be done.

True, this would give the road-agent about eighteen hours' start, but mortal man on the best of horses could not cover two hundred miles in that time.

In the morning the journey was made, and at noon Pendragon walked into the telegraph office at Cuchara.

"Nary message," said the operator; "the wire is down."

CHAPTER XVIII.

A CLEVER SCHEME.

"Down!" gasped Pendragon, amazed at the unexpected intelligence.

"Yes, the other side of Lamy; that's the station on the main line where the little branch road runs up to Santa Fé. Santa Fé, you know, is not on the main line."

"Yes, yes, I know it."

"The line is all right as far as Lamy, and for that matter all along the main line, but I can't reach Santa Fé. It was all right twenty minutes ago, but I can't get anything from there now."

A bitter oath was on Pendragon's lips, but he choked it back, for he felt that he would be acting like a fool to allow this stranger to see how annoyed he was.

He began to see how strong a game the road-agent was playing.

He had managed to have the wires cut between Alamosa and Cuchara; then, anticipating that the railroad might be used to surmount the first break, he had caused the wires to be severed on the line of the little branch road, so that Santa Fé was totally cut off from all telegraphic communication with the outside world.

"It is of the utmost importance for me to get a message through to Santa Fé. A thousand dollars wouldn't be any object to me if I could make the rifle!" the millionaire exclaimed, in great excitement.

"Well, really, sir, it isn't a question of money," the operator replied. He was a civil-spoken young man and anxious to do all he could for the Silver King.

"The way the matter stands all the money in the world wouldn't do any good. I have notified the main office that I can't get anything through to Santa Fé, although I have no doubt they found it out as soon as I did."

"But are you sure that there is anything the matter with the line?" Pendragon asked. "The operator at Santa Fé may have stepped out of the office for a few minutes."

"Oh, no, he wouldn't do it at this time of day; it would be as much as his situation was worth. There isn't the least doubt that there is a break in the line."

"No possible way to get a message through then?" Pendragon inquired, feeling savagely angry, not only at the prospect of losing five hundred thousand dollars, but because the disguised road-agent would succeed in his cleverly-planned scheme, thereby scoring a second triumph.

Willingly would he have given twice five hundred thousand to have baffled the Unknown in his design.

"No, sir, and if the break is a serious one, as it probably is, the quickest way for you to get at Santa Fé will be to take the train."

"Curse the luck!" cried the millionaire, in supreme disgust. "I'd give a small fortune to open communication with my correspondents in Santa Fé within the next six hours."

"Say!" he cried, abruptly, as an idea flashed across his mind. "Couldn't you send a message to the telegraphing station nearest to Santa Fé and have the dispatch sent over? It doesn't matter what it costs, you know; expense in this emergency is no object."

"Yes, that might be done," the agent replied.

Hardly had the words been spoken when the telegraph instrument began working.

"Hullo!" cried the operator, gleefully, "there's Santa Fé now!"

"Is the line all right then?"

"Oh, yes; he says he's ready for business."

"Put this dispatch through immediately," and the millionaire hastily wrote a message on one of the telegraph blanks.

"MENDOZA BROTHERS, BANKERS, SANTA FE:—

"If any one presents an order for the delivery of my tin trunk, have the party arrested immediately; hold him for highway robbery. Am coming by first train. LAWRENCE PENDRAGON."

The dispatch was soon on its way, and then the millionaire sat down to await the answer of the bankers.

In due time it came:

"All right; officer in readiness."

"MENDOZA BROTHERS."

A thrill of exultation crept over Pendragon as he perused the dispatch.

"Thank you, I am much obliged," he said to the operator, and he delighted the heart of that young gentleman by inviting him to take dinner with him at the only house of public entertainment that the place boasted.

It was a weary wait for the millionaire, but the train came along at last, Pendragon boarded it, and off it went on its Western way.

After a long and tiresome ride, Lamy was reached, and the millionaire stepped from the car to the platform.

At the time of which we write, the snort of the iron horse had not waked the echoes in the old town of Santa Fé, and passengers thither bound, after reaching Lamy, were obliged to take coaches which made the trip in about six hours.

The first man that Pendragon saw upon the platform was John Mendoza, the head of the house of Mendoza Brothers.

He greeted the millionaire, and the two men shook hands heartily.

"I drove over to meet you with my own team," the banker explained, "for I had an idea you would prefer three hours behind my bays to four hours in the stage."

"Most decidedly!" Pendragon exclaimed. "I'm deuced glad you came, for I have been on pins and needles during the whole trip. I hate to be obliged to transact important business by telegraph."

"Oh, I got your dispatch all right," the banker said, as he led the way to where a fine pair of powerful bays were attached to a light buggy.

"A splendid team," observed the millionaire, with the air of a critic, as he clambered into the vehicle.

"No better in this section," replied the banker as he followed Pendragon's example and took up the lines.

"Mungo, you come over by the stage, and you will find me at—"

"At my house, of course!" exclaimed Mendoza. "No need of your going to a hotel as long as I've got a ranch in Santa Fé."

Mungo nodded; he was noted for being sparing of speech, Mendoza chirruped to his horses, and away the well-trained beasts went at a brisk trot.

"Yes, sir," the banker remarked, "I'll venture to say—and I don't think I am boasting, either—that there isn't a better pair of horses in a square hundred miles. They stand me in a thousand apiece."

"They are worth the money; but you say you got my dispatch all right?"

"Yes."

"I was afraid that there might be some trouble, for I have been terribly bothered to get at you; the line was out of order between Alamosa and Cuchara, so I took the train, but when I made Cuchara, to my disgust, I found I couldn't get a dispatch through to Santa Fé."

"What was the matter?"

"The branch line out of order."

"Some blunder of the operator at Cuchara; the line has been all right, not a moment's delay in sending dispatches; we sent a dozen in all directions in the two or three hours that preceded the arrival of your message."

This intelligence amazed the millionaire.

"I can't understand it!" he remarked. "The fellow was perfectly honest about the matter, I am sure, and was anxious to do his best to oblige me. In fact, I offered him a thousand dollars to put a message through."

It was now the banker's turn to look amazed.

"Why, that was a large sum," he observed. "Is the business so important?"

"Certainly; that tin trunk is crammed full of valuables."

"Well, it's all right; your messenger has it safe."

"My messenger!" yelled Pendragon, almost rising to his feet in his astonishment.

"Yes; he came for it, and I delivered the trunk as you directed in your dispatch—here it is," and Mendoza placed a telegraphic dispatch in Pendragon's hand.

The millionaire, his head in a whirl, read aloud the message, which was as follows:

"MENDOZA BROTHERS, SANTA FE:—

"Have sent a messenger with written order for my tin trunk. Deliver it. Am coming on first train. Have officer ready; important business."

"LAWRENCE PENDRAGON."

"Oh, this is infamous!" the Silver King exclaimed, realizing that he had been beaten by the road-agent in this novel contest.

"What is the matter—isn't the dispatch all right?"

"Oh, no; it is all wrong. That order was extorted from me at the point of a pistol. I telegraphed you to refuse to honor the order and to have an officer in readiness to arrest the fellow when he presented the paper."

And then the millionaire related to the astonished banker the particulars of his two adventures with the disguised road-agent.

"Twice he has got the best of me," he said in conclusion; "but the third time, if he does try it on again, I think I will trip him."

At Santa Fé they drove directly to the telegraph office to ascertain, if possible, how the job had been worked.

The explanation was simple. Some one who understood the telegraph business had "tapped" the line with an instrument outside of Santa Fé, and when Pendragon's message came along had taken it from the wires and sent another in its stead.

"I'll be even with the fellow before six months are over, if it costs me a million!" the Silver King exclaimed.

He began to realize that a bitter foe had entered the lists against him.

CHAPTER XIX.

MUGGLES'S GAL.

SOME years before the time of which we write, Mike Creegan and a man named Philip Muggles were quite intimate—pards, in fact, as the Westerners say.

The two had come to Colorado together and

had done a great deal of prospecting in company, but never succeeded in making any big strike.

Becoming dissatisfied with his luck, Muggles had determined to go it alone, and went down into New Mexico, and during his absence Creegan and Blake came together, became partners, and shortly afterward located the Black Cloud mine.

When Muggles returned, his trip southward not proving profitable, he found that his former associate was "fixed" for life.

Then "Phil" was wroth—not because Creegan had struck it rich, but because he had been fool enough to go off on a wild-goose chase.

"It's jest my luck!" he declared. "I light out and Mike strikes it. Phaps it's better for him, though, that I did go off on my own hook, for I reckon if I had been with him my bad luck would have cast a spell over him, and he wouldn't have located nary Black Cloud claim."

The discovery proved beneficial to Muggles, however, although he hadn't any hand in it, for the owner of the claim needed a practical, experienced miner, such as Phil was, and his services were secured as superintendent of the mine.

Muggles was an odd, strange sort of a man, very reserved, and what his life had been before coming to Colorado no one knew.

He had been in the "mountains" for about ten years, and as no one ever heard him speak of a wife or family, everybody took him to be an old bachelor; he was a man of forty-five or thereabouts.

Considerable astonishment was therefore excited in the little community of Blakeville when Phil Muggles went down to the hotel one evening, joined the circle of loungers gathered to await the arrival of the stage from Del Norte, and when a little tow-headed, gray-eyed girl, about twelve years old, descended from it, greeted her as his daughter.

His associates joked with him considerably upon the fact of his being a family man and yet not allowing any one to know it.

"I reckoned it wasn't anybody's business," he replied. "My old woman—Heaven rest her soul!—passed in her checks when the baby was about a year old."

"I felt so bad about it that I couldn't bear to stay at home, so I came out West and turned miner, some of my wife's folks volunteering to take keer of the baby for me."

"In course as long as I was wandering 'round leading a vagabond life, I couldn't send for the kid, but now that I have settled down and got a steady job, I kinder thought it would be about the right thing to have her with me."

The girl was not what would be called beautiful, or even pretty, but she had an intelligent, pleasing face, was lively and quick-witted, and she soon acquired the reputation among the miners of being "smarter than chain-lightning."

She kept house for her father—he occupied a little cabin just outside of the works of the Black Cloud mine—and soon became a general favorite.

Phil Muggles's luck seemed to turn with the advent of his "gal," and it was the opinion of the camp that Phil was getting along very well.

And Muggles himself said in his confidential moments that he had never got on so well or enjoyed his life so well before.

But grim death, as if envious of the tranquility the miner enjoyed, stepped in and with his fatal shears snipped his thread of life in twain.

He died in just about three years from the time that his daughter arrived in the camp.

So "Muggles's gal" was left all alone in the world, but luckily for the orphan she had plenty of friends.

The miner had saved quite a sum of money, which he had prudently invested, and the girl was not badly off.

Then, too, during her father's lifetime she had been accustomed to cook not only for Muggles, but for Mike Creegan and Mr. Blake and his son, who messed with the miner.

And after her father's death, as she said she was not at all afraid of staying in the cabin alone, the arrangement was kept up.

In reality there wasn't much danger of any one molesting the girl.

The cabin was within call of the mine where Blake and his son, Mike Creegan and half a dozen workmen slept, and if any one had attempted to molest her, a single cry of alarm would have brought them all to her aid.

Then, too, there was another reason why the girl, a maid of fifteen at the time of her father's death, was reluctant to leave Blakeville, so the gossips of the camp declared.

Young Blake was only a few years older than the girl, and had just arrived at that age when it is natural for a youth to seek a sweetheart, and the busybodies of the town asserted that there was a love affair between the two and in due course of time Dolly Muggles would become Mrs. Nebraska Blake.

Whether this was true or not, the mysterious disappearance of the young man seemed to have a great effect upon the girl.

Apparently she felt as badly over the matter as the old man, his father.

But her grief did not last like Mr. Blake's, nor

did it drive her out of her wits, and as time passed on, day succeeded day, week followed week, and finally lengthened into month and year, and still not the slightest clew was discovered in regard to the fate of Nebraska Blake, she rallied from her depression and became her usual self again, the old man on the contrary sinking into a sort of second childhood.

She seemed to be reluctant to speak in regard to the missing man, and more than one of the gossips of the camp had shrewdly surmised that there might have been a quarrel between the two—a lovers' quarrel—and young Blake had gone away in anger.

When this was suggested to Mike, he pronounced it to be simply ridiculous.

"In the first place," he said, "I doubt if the gal and Nebraska ever had any love affair at all, and I'm mighty well sure that thar wasn't any secret understanding between them. I don't doubt that Dolly thought a heap of Nebraska, and I know he reckoned she was a right smart nice gal, but I know he wasn't struck on her, 'cos he wasn't the man to hide anything of that kind.

"Nebraska never played a game in the dark in his life," he further asserted. "I've known the boy for a long time, and a more right up and down straightforward cuss never broke the bread of life.

"Twasn't in him to make love to a gal like Dolly unbeknown to anybody. If he had been arter the gal he would have come right out afore everybody.

"He wasn't no man's slave, but as independent as a hog on ice. He could hoe his own row anywhere in this world and wasn't beholden to nobody.

"It would have been an easy matter for him to get his own living and take keer of a family, if he felt inclined that way. But thar wasn't any reason for his going away on account of Dolly. If he had hankered arter the gal I reckon he could have got her if he had gone arter her in the proper way, and I know for sart'in that the old man wouldn't have said a word ag'in' it, for the gal is a pet of his and allers has been since she came to the camp, and in fact he went so far as to let out to me once that in his opinion Nebraska might go a mighty sight further and fare worse in the way of a wife than to take Muggles's gal, so it's all nonsense for anybody for to say that she had anything to do with his going away."

This emphatic talk put a stop to the open discussion of the subject, although some of the gossips still quietly held to the opinion that the girl knew more of the matter than she was willing to admit.

Time wore on until the mysterious disappearance of Nebraska Blake became a matter of history.

It has to be a big sensation, in the busy, bustling life of the frontier, to cause it to remain a subject of discussion for over a few months.

Nothing occurred to cause any talk about Muggles's gal until about a month before the time at which we commenced our story, and then Dolly Muggles astonished every one who knew her by suddenly leaving the Black Cloud mine and taking a situation at the hotel.

Kansas Jim Johnson was a bachelor and therefore was obliged to hire female help to run his "shanty."

The principal woman of the establishment, a stout, middle-aged German, became infatuated with a newly-arrived miner and eloped with him without a word of warning.

Kansas Jim swore like a maniac when he discovered that his "chief cook and bottle-washer" had taken "French leave" between two days, as the saying is, and he hailed Muggles's gal as a guardian-angel when she applied for the situation.

Creegan was astounded when the girl came to him with the information that she had arranged to go to the hotel.

"What on earth do you want to leave us for?" he naturally asked.

The girl appeared to be troubled by the bluntly put question, and replied that she really didn't know.

She hadn't any particular reason, only that she wanted a change, and she thought the chance too good a one to be missed.

It would only be for a little while, she continued, for she had arranged with the landlord to be released from the engagement, after giving him time to get another woman, if she found after a trial that she did not like it, so the chances were that she would soon be back in her old home again.

Creegan was a shrewd man; he knew the girl well, saw she had made up her mind, and so did not attempt to turn her from her purpose.

He had a suspicion, too, that there was some deep motive for her action, but this surmise he kept to himself.

CHAPTER XX.

THE BLACK CLOUD MINE.

ON a pleasant evening just three days after the one when the millionaire had been stopped by the foot-pad, the girl paid a visit to the Black Cloud works.

Since the beginning of Pendragon's attempt to gain possession of the mine, the outlying cabins had been abandoned and all the men concentrated in the works.

Creegan had made up his mind to meet violence with violence.

Pendragon's intimacy with the venal Judge Jake McKinney was no secret to any one in the region, and Creegan suspected from the beginning that the millionaire's first move would be to get an order from the judge empowering the sheriff to take charge of the works, and the miner had determined not to pay the least attention to such a mandate, but to oppose the sheriff with all the force he could raise if that worthy attempted to enforce the judge's order.

So the works were garrisoned just like a fortress, and a regular line of pickets posted on the outside, and the pickets were there day and night in order to prevent the possibility of a surprise.

As it was a pleasant night the girl had taken advantage of it to pay a visit to her old home.

In the largest cabin within the works, which was "head-quarters," sat Mike Creegan, old Blake, and Dolly Muggles.

The men had just dispatched their frugal supper and had lit their pipes when the girl entered.

Dolly glanced inquiringly at the old man when she came in.

He had tilted his chair back against the wall and was seemingly lost in abstraction when the girl entered.

"How is he now, Mr. Creegan?" she asked. She had not been to the works for a week, and noticed that there seemed to be a change in his appearance.

She spoke softly, so as not to attract the old man's attention.

"Well, Dolly, he ain't so well as he was," Creegan replied, placing a chair for the girl. "I'm afraid he'll go to pieces pretty soon; you see I am obliged to keep him chock-full of whisky 'bout all the time. I don't suppose that it is over and above good for him, but what on earth is a man to do?"

"Unless he is full of liquor he's just miserable. I asked Doc Sharp what he thought about it. Doc, you know, was a genuine doctor once afore he got into trouble and had to vamose, and he said that as there wasn't the least bit of hope for the old man, his death only being a question of time, in his judgment he ought to be kept comfortable while he lived, and if whisky soothed him, and made him feel easy, then he ought to have it."

"Is he under the influence of liquor now?" she asked, seating herself in the chair which Creegan had brought.

"Oh, yes, he's had half a pint, the best stuff, too, that money can buy. You wouldn't think that the old man could take half a pint of raw whisky almost at a gulp, would you?"

"Indeed I would not."

"Well, that's his regular allowance, a half-pint at each meal, and another half-pint jest before he goes to bed at night."

"I say meals, but, Lord bless you, Dolly, he don't hardly eat enough to keep a sparrow alive. If it wasn't for the whisky I believe he'd collapse in a week!" Creegan exclaimed. "Doc says he would, and he knows a heap 'bout sich things; that is, if you take him when he's sober. When he fires in five or six drinks of whisky, he don't know anything at all."

"In fact, take Doc when he's on a spree and he's the biggest devil, and the greatest idiot that ever lived."

"Isn't it sad, this terrible wreck?" the girl remarked, genuine tears of sympathy glistening in her eyes.

"Awful!"

"And I don't suppose he will ever be any better."

"No, that's jest what I've been telling you."

"And it all dates from the disappearance of his son?"

"Yes, that was about the beginning of it, and no doubt had a great deal to do with it, although I really think he had begun to weaken some time before that."

"You see, Dolly, he was one of those peculiar men who can't stand success, and we struck it so rich hyer that it kinder turned his head. We didn't anticipate at first of course that we were going to have all the trouble with the thing that we have had."

"When we first got into the concern it really looked as if we were going to take the money out by the barrels-full, and we could have sold out a dozen times right at the beginning for a figure which would have made both of us independent for life, but as we reckoned the money would do us as much good as anybody we held on as tightly as an alligator to a dead nigger."

"This Larry Pendragon has made you a great deal of trouble too," the girl observed.

"Yes, durn him for a p'isoned sarprint," Creegan replied, with savage emphasis.

"I reckon he has cost us nigh onto ten thousand dollars, and the end ain't reached yet, either. I hate to say it, Dolly, but I shouldn't be surprised if thar was bloodshed in the business afore we get through."

"Oh, I hope not!" the girl exclaimed, impulsively.

"Sart'in, so do I," replied the other, soberly,

"but you see the trouble is, Dolly, that this hyer man is so big that he thinks he kin boss everything and everybody."

"He's been used to having his own way, and if he can't git everything jest as he wants it it riles him all up."

"Between you and me and the bed-post, Dolly, he ain't got no more right to a share in this property than the man in the moon. It is all a game from beginning to end, but as he has money and influence on his side he thinks he kin freeze us out."

"Do you think his endeavor to gain possession of this property had anything to do with Mr. Blake's illness?"

"Oh, yes, not the least doubt about it."

"There isn't?"

"Not a mite."

"How very dreadful!"

"Of course, but what does such a man as Larry Pendragon care for any such trifle as that?" Creegan observed.

"He don't set no great store on any human life except his own."

"Is that possible?" Dolly exclaimed.

"It's the honest truth I'm telling you. What is a man or two to him so long as he can rake in the money?"

"I shouldn't think the man would be able to sleep at night!" the girl exclaimed, honest indignation in both face and voice.

"Lord love you! he not only sleeps as soundly as a top at night, but he takes a good forty winks or so after dinner every day. It is we poor devils who are compelled to fight sich men who don't sleep."

"We have to lay awake at night, thinking and planning, and contriving how to keep their hands from our throats."

"It is perfectly awful!"

"Awful is jest about the right word."

"And you think then that this Larry Pendragon is not free from blame in Mr. Blake's case?" the girl asked.

"Oh, I know he isn't," Creegan answered, promptly. "I'd hate to lay sich a thing as that at any man's door unless I was perfectly sure of it, but in this case I reckon I am—as sure as a man kin be of anything in this mighty uncertain world."

"I wouldn't have such a load on my shoulders for the world!" Dolly cried, impulsively.

"Neither would I, but a fellow like this Pendragon don't keer two cents about it. I don't s'pose he thinks that thar is any justice hereafter, or else he'd go a leetle slow."

"Mebbe he thinks he kin squar' the thing arter he gits beyond the bars, but how on earth the rifle kin be worked is a puzzle. I give it up."

"Oh, he will surely pay hereafter for such evil work, you may be sure of that, Mr. Creegan; there cannot be the shadow of a doubt about it," the girl said, firmly, and in her mind there wasn't any doubt but that she had spoken the truth.

"Well, if Larry Pendragon is called to a strict account, he'll have a hot time of it," Creegan observed.

"As I was saying, I think he was a leetle to blame for the old man's condition. As I said, he was a leetle thrown off his balance by our strike here, and the mysterious disappearance of his son was a severe shock and for a time completely unhinged him. But then he commenced to mend, and I really think he would have got better if Pendragon hadn't started in on his durned crusade."

"You think there isn't any doubt that Mr. Blake did not dispose of his interest in the property?" the girl asked, a thoughtful expression upon her face.

"Not a mite of doubt, because the old man at the time was not in a condition to attend to any such business," Creegan answered, promptly. "Such a sale wouldn't stand in law even if it had been made, which I doubt."

"I think the whole thing is a lie from beginning to end, but if it is truth, what on earth did the old man do with the certified check? He's jest like a child, always brings me anything that anybody gives him, and can generally tell a pretty straight story of how he came to get it, but this hyer check bothers him completely, and I could never get him to own up to it."

The interview was interrupted at this point by a tap on the door.

Creegan opened it, and Andy McAlpine, foreman of the Yellow Chief mine, walked in, followed by the young stranger who called himself Jack Mohave.

Andy was an old-time pard of Creegan and had the right of entry through the picket line.

"Mike, thar's mischief brewing," McAlpine declared. "The sheriff will be apt to pay you a visit afore you are many hours older. Are you fixed for a fight?"

CHAPTER XXI.

PREPARING FOR A FIGHT.

BOTH Creegan and the girl started at this intelligence, but the old man still apparently slept on, though it was clear he was not really asleep but only in a sort of a doze, for he returned the pipe to his mouth and every now and then pulled gently at it.

"Fixed for a fight?" Creegan exclaimed. "Oh, yes, and I have been ever since Larry Pendragon began his bird's-egging in this region. But is it a sure enough thing? Is the sheriff in town, and does he really mean business?"

"I reckon he does, and he's in town for a fact."

"Got a gang at his heels?"

"No, and that is what bothers me. Pendragon and O'Ballahoe are with him, but no one else as far as I could discover."

"He may have his men concealed on the outskirts of the camp," Creegan suggested.

"That idea occurred to me, and the moment I got wind that the sheriff was in town and nary army with him, this gentleman,"—and he nodded to Mohave—"and I mounted our horses and did some pretty tall scouting, and in a quiet way we pumped everybody we ran across, but we didn't discover any trace of any gang, and not a soul had seen any strangers."

"By the way," he said, abruptly, "I never thought of it, but I reckon you hain't met my friend, hyer. This is Mister Mohave, Mister Jack Mohave, Mister Mike Creegan, the big man of this hyer consarn."

"Jack is a stranger in these parts, Mike, but I'll vouch for him; he's true blue, every time, and he reckoned that if Mister Sheriff was a-scooting 'round hyer for to make any trouble that he wouldn't mind having a finger in the pie."

"I reckon I kin stop a bullet as well as the next man," Mohave said in husky tones, as though he had a bad cold.

"You are welcome as the day, pard," remarked Creegan frankly, extending his hand and giving the stranger a hearty grip, "and though I ain't going 'round asking people to git mixed up in my quarrels, yet if a good man feels inclined to chip in of his own accord, why, I'm right proud to be honored with his company."

The two men shook hands warmly, while the girl surveyed the face of the young man intently, and there was a sort of a puzzled expression upon her features.

"Thank ye, I'll do the best I kin for ye," responded Mohave.

Old man Blake opened his eyes suddenly and looked around him.

"Where is he?" he piped in his shrill, weak, quavering voice.

The attention of all present was at once turned upon the old man.

"Where is who, old pard?" asked Creegan, going to the old man and laying his hand caressingly upon his shoulder.

"My boy, my Nebraska," answered the invalid, gazing around with his weak, faded eyes as if he expected to behold his long-lost son.

Creegan shook his head.

"Poor old pard, his mind is wandering again," he said, softly.

"No, it ain't, it ain't anything of the sort; I know what I am about as well as you do, Mike Creegan," replied the old man, betraying a spirit which he had not exhibited for many a long day.

"I heard him; if you are deaf I'm not, and do you think I wouldn't know the voice of my Nebraska, even though he spoke to me from some damp and moldering grave?"

A solemn hush fell upon the little party as the words of the old man reached their ears.

Was it possible that the poor old man, hovering on the brink of the grave, did have a glimpse of an open portal, and to his ears came the sound of a voice from the other world?

Creegan smiled sadly.

"You'll see him pretty soon, mebbe, old pard," he said. "I reckon that the meeting ain't far off."

The miner was firm in the belief that young Blake had joined the majority and crossed the dark river which rolls all around the world, and so when he comforted the father with the assurance that he should soon see his son, he referred to the meeting in the spirit land.

"Oh, I'm in no hurry, although he has been absent a long time," the invalid murmured. "But I am a patient man and can wait. All I wanted was to know that he was near. I searched all over the world for him and couldn't find him, but I didn't lose hope."

"Folks said that he was dead, but I knew better than that; the Blakes are a long-lived race and we don't die young unless we are cut off by violence, and my boy was as true and as brave as a lion, as honest, too, as the day."

"Friend and foe alike always knew how to take him; he never betrayed a friend or took an unfair advantage of a foe."

"It's all right, Mike, so long as I've heard his voice and know that he is around I'm satisfied, and now I'll take another nap," and the old man closed his eyes and dozed off again.

"Blame me if it don't beat all!" Creegan remarked in a cautious whisper. "I never knew him to become quiet after one of these turns without his whisky; and it takes a heap sometimes to quiet him, too."

"He will not require any quieting draught this time," the girl observed. "He has dropped off to sleep as quietly as an infant. It is very strange, isn't it? Don't you think it is odd, sir?" and she addressed the question directly to Jack Mohave, fixing her shrewd keen eyes, bright as those of any squirrel, intently upon his face.

"Very odd," said the young man in a half-whisper, as though he was afraid of disturbing the old gentleman.

Again a puzzled expression swept over the face of the girl. It was evident she was perplexed by something, and yet not so evident as to what it was.

Neither Creegan nor McAlpine noticed the girl, for both were rather blunt, stolid men, and if the young fellow observed that there was anything strange about the girl's manner he did not betray it.

"I never took much stock in the gospel-sharps' talk that the folks from the other world come down to us on earth once in a while," Creegan said, slowly, with a wise shake of the head. "Of course I've met a heap of fellows in my time who knew all 'bout it; fellows who, if you were to believe all they said, were in the habit of shaking hands with their dead friends every night in the week, and according to their yarns they were on good terms, reg'lar pards in fact, of a heap of big men whose flesh and bones have long ago turned to dust."

"But as thar wasn't any one of this gang whose word, even under oath, any sensible man who knew them would be willing to take, it wasn't to be expected that anybody who knew enough to go in would believe a word they said; and why Washington, Franklin and a lot of other first-class men should choose to open communication from the other world with a gang of miserable dead-beats that they would have been ashamed to have been seen speaking to when they were alive, was the biggest kind of a mystery."

"I never took any stock in sich yarns," McAlpine remarked. "I remember once a galoot came along when I was down to Del Norte and hung out his shingle for a fortune-teller, and me and a lot of the boys took him in."

"Some of the gang he hit off right smart, but when I tackled him and axed how my wife and kids were gitting on in the far East, and he allowed that Mrs. McAlpine was not behaving herself jest as she ought to, I had to gi'n him warning to git up and dust inside of four-and-twenty hours, or else look for me on the war-path."

"Why, I never knew you were married, Mac," Creegan remarked, in surprise.

"No more am I, and I never was, neither, but I wasn't going to allow that long-haired son of a sea-cook to shoot off his mouth 'bout Mrs. McAlpine, even if thar warn't no sich creature on this hyer footstool," answered the miner, with a grin.

"Waal, thar ain't any humbug 'bout this riffle," Creegan observed. "You all seed the thing as well as me. The old man allowed he heard his boy, Nebraska, a-talking to him, and I feel jest as sure as a man kin feel of anything in this uncertain world that Nebraska Blake cashed in his checks a long time ago."

"So if the old man did hear his boy a-talking to him, it wasn't any earthly sound that reached his ears."

"Mighty mysterious thing," McAlpine declared, with a wise look on his weather-beaten face. "I reckon I wouldn't have been willing to believe this hyer riffle could have happened if I hadn't seen it."

Just at this moment an interruption came.

The captain of the pickets, a tall, middle-aged, raw-boned fellow, whose hatchet-like face fully betrayed his Eastern origin, and was commonly known as Yankee Smith, made his appearance.

"Major Joe Pepper is outside and wants to know if he can't have a word with you, Mike," Smith announced.

"How does the major stand?" Creegan asked, addressing McAlpine.

"He's all right; you can depend upon him," the miner answered. "In fact, thar ain't any one of the old boys of the camp that you can't depend upon. They are all with you to a man. Thar may be a few of the new-comers, who ain't been long enough in the town to know what is what, and who is who, that Pendragon kin count upon, but I reckon thar ain't many even of them. Larry Pendragon has mighty few friends anywhere, 'cept the veniel cusses who hang onto him 'cos he is well-heeled in the money department."

"Waal, I haven't had any chance to talk to the major; in fact, I hain't seen him for a dog's age, for since this rumpus commenced I have stuck close to the mine."

"Run the major in, Yankee!"

The miner departed.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE OLD MAN SPEAKS.

"THE major knew that I was coming hyer," McAlpine explained after Smith had departed. "I had a leetle talk with him at the hotel arter Mohave and myself came in from our scout. He was in the street when we started, and naturally inquired what we was up to. The major is a long-headed old cuss, and can see into a mill-stone as far as the next man."

"I told him that the sheriff was in town, and that he and Pendragon and that Paddy-whack

lawyer had their heads together as thick as thieves, and how I suspicioned thar was something up, and me and Mohave was going to take a leetle look 'round to see if the sheriff had brought an army with him."

"When I came in the major asked if I had struck the trail, and when I told him thar wasn't nary sign of a gang to be picked up, he allowed he reckoned the party was going to try some lawyer-trick first."

"Anyhow, he felt sart'in, as I did, that thar was mischief brewing, so when I told him that me and Mohave would make a leetle friendly call upon you, so you would be all ready to receive the galoots if they meant business, the old cuss said he would hang 'round the hotel, and if he picked up any news he would either come or send word."

"Waal, I reckoned the major would turn up on the right side, but I wasn't sart'in 'bout it," Creegan observed, "for, as you say, the old fellow is mighty long-headed, and as keen a sharp as kin bescaured up in these diggin's, and I didn't know but what he would calculate that Pendragon would come out a winner in the long run, and so go for him in order to be on the right side."

"Oh, he's a close calculator, I'll own. No man that knows him can help admitting that," the miner replied. "But his heart is in the right place, and then, between you and me and the bed-post, he thinks you are going to get the best of the fight in the long run, fer he reckons that money can't buy everything in the world, and as you've got the right on your side you ought to come out ahead. The old man is sharp, you kin bet all your wealth on that."

The conversation was interrupted at this point by the entrance of the "major."

"How air ye all?" he said, in his cheery, genial way. "Miss Dolly, I am delighted to see you; I've been waiting to git a chance to speak to you for some time, but somehow I never seemed to be lucky enough to run across you. I wanted to tell you that them pies of yourn air 'bout the nicest eating that I've run ag'in' since I struck this hyer district."

The major boarded at the hotel, and so had a daily opportunity to test Miss Muggles's skill in the culinary department.

"I'm glad you like them," the girl replied, simply; her thoughts were not now on pies, nor on the petty routine of her commonplace life, but far away on more serious matters.

"Mike, I am glad to see you looking so well," continued the old sharp. "You appear to be as hearty as a buck. I disremember ever seeing you look any better since I've knowed you."

"I haven't any reason to complain," Creegan replied.

"No, sir-ee, you would be safe to stake a heap on that!" cried the major, emphatically. "Trouble seems to be agreeing with you; you're getting fat on it, and that is more than the other party can say, for I sw'ar I never see'd him looking so badly—so reg'larly hollowed out, since I first run across him, as he is to-night."

"Did you pick up any news, major?" McAlpine asked, pushing a chair to the veteran, as he spoke.

"Oh, yes, a leetle," the major replied, with one of his knowing smiles. "I knew thar was something in the wind, and so I kinder hung 'round till the plant sprouted."

"You know I allowed to you, Mac, when you diskivered that the sheriff didn't have a gang with him, that I reckoned they were going to try to ring in a cold deal. I suspicioned that they had the cards stocked and would throw a jack from the bottom of the pack every time."

"I wasn't far out of the way either; jest look at that," and the old man took a printed hand-bill, about a foot square, from his pocket, unfolded it, and passed it over to Creegan.

The Black Cloud man read it aloud:

"TEN THOUSAND DOLLARS REWARD."

"Whereas on the night of May 5th I, Lawrence Pendragon, was assaulted by a disguised road-agent in the locality known as Hell's Canyon and robbed of some valuable legal documents, and the same masquerading scoundrel, a week later, held me up on the northern road about two miles from Del Norte and at the muzzle of a revolver forced me to sign an order for the delivery to him of a tin trunk belonging to me deposited in the banking-house of Mendoza brothers at Santa Fé, said tin trunk containing five hundred thousand dollars' worth of United States bonds, and as by means of the order this scoundrel succeeded in obtaining the trunk, I will pay the above-named amount for any information that will lead to the discovery and capture of the rascal, or a liberal amount in proportion to the service to any one who will furnish a clew by means of which the identity of the man can be ascertained."

"Any pal or confederate that this scoundrel may have, will make far more by coming to me and giving a hint so the authorities can apprehend the man, than he can hope to gain by keeping on with him."

"And I solemnly promise to hold free from blame any one who has had a hand in these outrages, provided information is furnished so I can secure the road-agent."

"I care not what it costs, nor how long it takes, I am determined never to rest until I have this villain safe within a prison's walls, and all who may have aided and abetted this ruffian are hereby warned that they will only have themselves to blame for the

consequences if they refrain from coming forward and making a clean breast of their knowledge.

"Information may be sent by letter and will be liberally paid for if of the least value, and the party can remain in the background and his agency in the matter need not be known to any one if he so desires.

"Address,

"P. O'BALLAHOE, Attorney-at-law,

"Blakeville,

"Colorado."

A dead silence fell upon the party when the reading of the handbill was ended.

A more ingeniously-worded document never came to the knowledge of any of them.

Ten thousand dollars was a stupendous sum to offer for the apprehension of a single man, and it seemed more than likely that the offer of such a sum would be apt to turn every man, woman and child in the district into a detective.

Then, too, how cunningly the millionaire tried to hold out inducements to the pals of the road-agent, if he had any, to betray their chief.

As the circular truly said, ten thousand dollars, all in a lump, was a far greater sum than any confederate of the bold robber could hope to gain by keeping on in a career of crime.

Then, too, if any pal of the ruffian was so much under his thumb that he feared to openly betray his leader in dread of the vengeance that might follow, all he had to do was to communicate by letter, and the job might be arranged.

It did not seem possible that these cunningly-planned measures would fail to insure the capture of the outlaw.

The lucky man who could apprehend him would by a single stroke capture a prize equal almost to striking a bonanza mine.

"Gen'lmen, w'ot do you think of that? Ain't that as nice a lay-out as ever was seen?" the major asked.

"Five hundred thousand dollars in Government bonds!" exclaimed McAlpine. "Durn me! if the chap didn't strike Pendragon for a pretty solid stake."

"The enormous reward offered ought to insure the capture of the man," Creegan observed; "but the chances are big that a man who had sense sufficient to plan a game that would pan out in that way, would be shrewd enough to get away from the section of country where the job was worked as soon as possible.

"Pendragon may catch him, but I would like to bet anybody a trifle that he don't. It was an awful pull on him though."

"Pretty tough," the major rejoined. "Larry is going at it as if he means to do his level best to make the trick. These handbills are to be distributed for a hundred miles, and all the sheriffs and constables notified."

"This is the business then that has brought the sheriff to the camp," Creegan remarked, "so we were barking up the wrong tree. He was not after us at all."

"Oh, yes, he is," the major replied. "He's coming to see you. I don't know what he wants, for I didn't get a chance to get onto that, but he is certainly coming to see you, for I heard him tell O'Ballahoe that he reckoned he would fetch the Black Cloud strike somewhar 'bout nine."

There was a little clock ticking on the rude mantle-piece in the room, and all eyes were now fixed upon it.

It wanted but three minutes to nine o'clock.

"Thar ain't much use of the sheriff coming hyer unless he's got an army at his back," Creegan remarked, with grim determination, "and even then before he has fooled 'round hyer long I reckon he will come to the opinion that it would have been money in his pocket if he had staid away."

Hardly had the words escaped from his lips when the door opened and gave entrance to Charley Diamond, Creegan's second in command.

"What's up, Charley?" the Black Cloud owner asked, perceiving by the face of the other that he came with important news.

"The sheriff is outside," responded Diamond, in his quiet way.

The superintendent was one of the quietest and coolest of men, always calm and unruffled, yet as brave as a bulldog; a man who never quailed no matter how great the danger.

"What does he want?" Creegan asked.

"To see you."

"Is he alone?"

"No, that rascally O'Ballahoe is with him."

"Got some papers to serve, I presume."

"I reckon so."

"You kept him at a safe distance?"

"Oh, yes, just outside rifle-range. I warned him that if he came within range the county would have to get a new sheriff."

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE SHERIFF'S BUSINESS.

DIAMOND's answer provoked a general smile; all the hearers were well aware, too, that it was no idle boast, for the superintendent would surely

ly have been as good as his word if the sheriff had chosen to disregard the timely warning.

"What did he say?" Creegan inquired.

"Oh, he was riled, of course; I don't blame him; since he has been sheriff he has been riding a pretty high horse; thinks he's a plum-bird on a lily root, you know; really puts on as many frills as though he was Governor; in fact, I reckon he thinks he's a bigger man than the Governor; and to have a plain, matter-of-fact galoot like myself order him round jest as if he was some mean, no-account, Maverick-stealing slugger, was enough to rile almost anybody.

"He was 'bout as mad a man as I seen lately. He shook his fist at me and wanted to know if I knew who he was, and I pretended not to recognize him and said no, I didn't know every loafer thar was in the town."

"Well, that must have cut him," McAlpine remarked, with a chuckle, "for he is touchy 'bout being a well-known man, and the last time he was in town he was boasting up at the hotel that he was one of the best-known men in the State."

"Oh, he was mad, thar wasn't any two ways 'bout that," Diamond remarked, phlegmatically, "and he hopped round thar for a time right lively, I tell you, but I had him covered with my Spencer, and he knows I'm a dead shot at any reasonable distance; then, too, I reckon he understands that I'm a man of my word, and if I say shoot I mean shoot every time."

"Oh, Tommy has got some good hoss sense," McAlpine remarked.

The sheriff was called Thomas Mulkirk, and although greatly given to boasting, in the main was a pretty sensible fellow.

He knew enough, at any rate, not to disregard the warning tendered him by Diamond.

"He wants to see you, Mike, he says, on particular business, and when I suggested that maybe he had some leetle legal document he wanted to shove into your hand, he swore right up and down that it wasn't so."

"What does he want, then?" Creegan asked.

"He comes on business, of course. Tommy Mulkirk is no friend of mine. I don't know as it would be exactly square to the man to class him as a foe, but he certainly is no friend."

"I did my level best to get him to state precisely what he wanted, but he was sly as an old coon with the dogs after him, and nary bit of satisfaction could I get out of him except that he wanted to see you on particular business and he wasn't going to serve any paper on you."

"It would not be wise for Sheriff Mulkirk to attempt it," the controller of the Black Cloud mine remarked, and though he spoke quietly and without a trace of passion, yet from his tone one used to reading mankind would have been certain he meant every word he uttered.

"I'll see the sheriff," he continued; "will you come along, gentlemen, and witness the fun?—for I fancy thar will be some fun before we get through, for the sheriff does not pay me a visit for nothing."

All signified that they would be pleased to accompany him, and even Dolly said:

"I wish I could go too, Mr. Creegan, although I suppose I had better return to the hotel, for it would be awful to be around if there should be any trouble."

"Yes, but I do not believe that anything important will occur to-night, still it would be better perhaps for you to go," the miner replied.

"Come down some day when the old man is awake; he will be glad to see you; he still knows his old friends."

"Yes, I will be sure to come as soon as I can. I do not think I shall stay at the hotel much longer, and then I will be here for good," she said, a troubled expression upon her features, and she kept her eyes fixed intently upon the face of Jack Mohave all the time she was speaking, but the young man did not seem to notice her scrutiny in the least.

"Waal, Dolly, we'll all be right glad to get you back," Creegan said, kindly, for he bore almost a father's affection for the girl.

"You will not be any more glad to get me back than I will be to come," she replied, quickly. "I hate the hotel, and almost everything and everybody connected with it!"

This petulant expression took them all by surprise.

"If you don't like it, what on earth makes you stay thar?" Creegan asked. "You ain't obligated to do so, you know, for you are just as welcome hyer as the sun."

"Oh, I don't know; I don't know why I ever went there, but it doesn't matter much; it will be all the same a hundred years hence. You may expect me here almost any time," the girl answered, evidently much disturbed, yet all the time watching Mohave covertly.

Diamond, let Dolly out by the little gate in the rear, so she need not pass by the sheriff," said Creegan. "Come again soon, and come for good as quickly as possible."

"All right. Good-by," and then, with a parting stare at the young man, she followed the superintendent.

The old sharp noticed the stare and marveled at it.

"Say, Mac," the major said, in an undertone

to McAlpine as the two passed into the open air, following the other, "did you notice how Dolly Muggles stared at your new party? Blamed if I don't think he's made a mash. How is that for high, eh? Dolly Muggles, too, of all the gals in the world! Why, she's the critter that never had a feller since she struck the town."

"You forget young Blake," McAlpine replied.

"Well, do you really think that there was any sweethearting a-going on between those two?" the old sharp asked. "I know that some folks suspicious that there was, but you know you can't always exactly most generally tell."

"I don't know any more about it than anybody else," the other replied. "The two were great friends, as was only natural under the circumstances, seeing they were thrown together."

"Nebraska allers used to escort the girl when thar was anything going on 'round 'bout the camp, but that, mebbe, wasn't anything more than friendship, you know."

"Yes, that's true enough, but arter Nebraska disappeared, she never went with nary other feller nowhar, and that kinder looked as if she was a-hankering arter him."

"If she didn't go it wasn't for the want of chances, for I've known a dozen fellows to be dead gone on her," McAlpine said. "Why, she might have taken her pick from 'bout all the young fellers in the town."

"Sart'in, thar ain't the least doubt 'bout that, but she didn't take nary bit of stock in any of them, and that air is what kinder makes me think young Blake was her mutton."

"Mebbe so, but you can't allers tell," McAlpine rejoined, with a shake of the head. "These gals are durned queer animals."

"Right you air, and this queen is the queerest in the pack. Did you get onto what she said 'bout the hotel?"

"Oh, yes."

"What do you make of it?"

"I give it up, pard; I reckon I'm too old a man to spend my time a-guessing at the reason for anything a woman does."

"She said she was sick of the hotel, and almost everything and everybody 'round it."

"Right you are, major, that is jest about what she said."

"Why on airth, then, did she go there, and what in thunder does she want to stay for, when thar ain't the least bit of need of it?"

"Give it up ag'in, pard; throw us some easier conundrum."

"Gals do beat all creation, don't they?" cried the major, in conclusion.

By this time the party had reached the stockade wall which surrounded the mine.

Some barrels were arranged at one side of the gate, so that by mounting them a view over the wall could be commanded.

"Take front seats, gentlemen, the entertainment sha'n't cost you a red cent, as far as I am concerned," Creegan said with grim humor, with his hand waving his guests toward the barrels.

The four men mounted the barrels; Diamond had gone to let the girl depart by the little gate in the rear of the stockade.

The moon, at its full, cast so bright a light that every object was almost as visible as by day.

Two hundred yards distant stood the sheriff and the Irish lawyer, held at bay, so to speak, by two of the picket-guards, who with cocked rifles prevented them from approaching any nearer to the mine.

The sheriff was a rather short, thick-set, burly individual, with a red face, the lower part of which was covered with a bushy black beard, and a blustering, important way with him.

It was plain from his bearing that he considered himself to be a man of great consequence.

"Hallo! is that you, Mr. Creegan?" he cried, the moment that the head of the Black Cloud man appeared above the fence.

"Yes I reckon I'm hyer, what thar is of me," Creegan answered.

"Whar in thunder do you think you air?" demanded Mulkirk, in a very authoritative way.

"I reckon I know whar I am," Creegan retorted, with perfect coolness.

"Waal, I don't believe you do, or else you wouldn't come no sich nonsense as this hyer. Putting out sentinels with guns to bother honest folks!" blustered the sheriff.

"But they don't bother honest folks; honest folks mind their own business, and don't intrude whar they ain't wanted."

"These are ticklish times, sheriff; thar's lot's of thieves and lawyers 'round," Creegan replied.

"The top of the avening to yees, Mister Creegan!" exclaimed the Irishman, prompt to see the point. "Ye meant that for me, and it's nate if not true. I owe ye wan."

"All right, pay as soon as you can; but to come down to the solid bed-rock of business. What do you want of me, sheriff, for I suppose you come on business?" Creegan asked.

"Right you are! I've got a search-warrant hyer. I want to search your premises for stolen property. I want Mr Pendragon's tin trunk containing five hundred thousand dollars in Government bonds!"

CHAPTER XXIV.

SEARCHING FOR THE PLUNDER.

THIS was a bombshell that was entirely unexpected by all the hearers, O'Ballahoe and the sheriff excepted.

"Pendragon's tin trunk!" Creegan exclaimed, thoroughly astonished by this unexpected demand.

"That is wot I sed, Mr. Creegan, and that is wot I'm arter."

"Containing five hundred thousand dollars in Government bonds?"

"That's the exact amount."

"And do you expect to find the property on these premises?" continued the miner, who could hardly bring himself to believe that there wasn't some mistake about the matter, for the idea seemed utterly preposterous.

"That is my little game just now."

"Mul Kirk has gone clear out of his head," said Diamond in an undertone to the rest, having just joined them on the barrels.

"Crazy as a bedbug!" ejaculated McAlpine.

"Yes, sir, a man would be safe to bet his bottom dollar that the cuss's head ain't screwed on right," Colonel Pepper observed.

"Oh, but this hyer is utterly ridiculous!" Creegan exclaimed. "What on earth sent you down hyer on sich a wild-goose chase?"

"The warrant is issued on information and belief, do ye mind, Mr. Creegan," said the Irishman, "and that is all the law requires, and it's your duty as a good citizen not to resist the execution of the warrant."

"In the name of goodness, does Larry Pendragon think that I am the man that got away with his tin trunk and his measly bonds?" the miner cried in irritation.

"Oh, no, not at all, at all!" the lawyer hastened to reply. "Mr. Pendragon knows better than that, but certain information has been afther coming to him that lades him to belave that the property is consaled on your premises here, and that is the raison he has been afther swearing out this warrant."

"Waal, I never suspicioned afore that Larry Pendragon was a fool, but now I begin to believe he is!" Creegan cried, irritated by this absurd accusation. "What kind of a man does he take me to be? Does he dare to think for a moment that I would have anything to do with road-agents or any such dirty scoundrels?" And the miner's voice fairly shook with passion as he put the question.

"Larry Pendragon had better go slow in this business," the Black Cloud owner continued.

"I'm a quiet, peaceable man, but I don't allow any critter that walks the earth to call me a thief, and if Larry Pendragon has dared to do this thing, then he's my meat, or I'm his, the first time we come together."

"Oh, see hyer, Creegan, you hain't got no call to talk in any sich way as that," expostulated the sheriff.

"The blazes I hain't!" cried the miner, exasperated.

"No, I don't think you have," the sheriff rejoined, with an air of great dignity.

"You don't? Waal, who in thunder are you, anyway! Are you a little god come down to earth to tell us poor critters what we must think and do?" Creegan demanded.

"Oh, yes, he's a little tin King Thunderbolt on wheels," Charley Diamond observed, quite loud enough to reach the ears of the sheriff, who grew redder than ever in the face with rage at being thus scorned.

"Durned if Mul Kirk hain't grown a foot higher since he went in as sheriff," McAlpine remarked, in a critical sort of way.

"He's jest the biggest man in this hyer State, and you kin copper him to win every time!" the old colonel declared; "and the more you put down on him the less you will take up."

These complimentary expressions reached the ears of the official, as the speakers fully intended they should, and Mul Kirk fairly danced up and down with rage.

"See hyer, I don't want to have any fuss with any of you galoots!" he cried, "but I want you to understand that if you go in to abuse me, you've got the wrong pig by the ear."

"He means wrong jackass," observed Diamond, still loud enough to reach the sheriff's ears. "He has made a slight mistake in the animal."

There was a general snicker from the party on the barrels at this remark.

The sheriff shook his fist at them, exasperated.

"I tell you what it is, gen'lemen, you will only have yourselves to blame if thar is any trouble 'bout this hyer thing."

"And you will only have yourself to blame, you gol-darned white-livered, no-souled polecat of a sheriff," cried Mike Creegan, flaming out into sudden rage, if I put a bullet through your miserable carcass!" and he snatched up his Winchester rifle, which was suspended by hooks in the stockade ready for use.

"For two cents I'd drive a leaden pill right through you!"

"Give Mike two cents, somebody!" ejaculated Charley Diamond; "it will be worth a dollar to see the sheriff kick!"

"Hould on! bad 'cess to yees!" cried the Irish lawyer, in alarm, for he knew Mike Creegan

well enough to know that he meant every word he uttered.

"Hould on! don't be afther doing anything rash—don't be afther doing anything that you may be sorry for aftherward, do ye mind?"

"Ye don't understand the thing, gintlemen," he continued. "Yees have a wrong conception of it altogether."

"I know that this durned polecat of a sheriff has insinuated that I'm a thief, and that's something I won't stand from any man that breathes the breath of life!" the miner replied.

"No, no, not at all, and that is where the misconception comes in!" O'Ballahoe exclaimed. "Will ye be afther having a wee bit of patience now and listen to r'ason while I explain the why and the wherefore of this proceeding?"

"Sartain; go ahead! you'll find me one of the most reasonable and patient men you ever struck, if you don't attempt to comb my ha'r the wrong way."

"Of coorse not; I wouldn't be afther doing anything to offend yees for the wourd. I'm a gintleman meself, and I think I know a gintleman whin I see him. You see, yees do be afther misunderstanding this thing altogether. The warrant doesn't insinuate that you had anything to do with the matter at all, at all. Ye've a dozen min on the premises hyer; shure you wouldn't be afther being responsible for the whole gang?"

"Yes, I would!" cried Creegan, quickly. "Thar ain't a man on the place that would do any road-agent business."

"Ah, well, it isn't safe for a man to take much risk nowadays in regard to phat another man may or may not do," the lawyer remarked, in his cautious way.

"Some wan of your hands may have done the job, of coorse unbeknown to yees. Anyhow, a certain party has made affidavit that the property is consaled on your premises, and a search-warrant has been granted, and if you are wise you will not resist the execution of the law."

"And if I do, I suppose you will fight your way in," Creegan suggested.

"I would, if I had to raise a thousand men," blustered the sheriff.

"Oh, hould yer whist!" cried O'Ballahoe, for he had sense enough to understand that nothing could be gained by attempting to bully such a man as Creegan. "No, Mr. Creegan, we don't come wid the last taste of malice in our hearts, only we would like to have a chance to search for the property, and if the tin trunk with the five hundred thousand dollars in bonds in it is on your premises, I'm sure you'd be the last man in the wourd to be afther trying to prevint us from laying hould of it."

"A little flattery sometimes does well," quoted Jack Mohave, in an undertone.

"Oh, that's the Irishman's best holt," McAlpine observed. "He kin sling more taffy and do it neater than any ten men in the camp."

"You bet!" the colonel observed; "when it comes to taffy, he holds a handful of trumps every time!"

"Oh, I know him of old, and he won't fool me a bit," Creegan remarked.

"See hyer, O'Ballahoe," he said, addressing the lawyer. "I don't take any stock in this yarn of yours at all. I think your game is to get on these premises under pretense of searching for this stolen property, and then serve some legal document on me."

"Oh, Mister Creegan, do ye think I'd be afther doing sich a m'ane trick?" the lawyer cried as if deeply wounded, and he placed his hand upon his heart and sighed as if wounded to the quick; whereupon there was a general howl of derision from the party by the wall.

"Ye murdering blaggards ye!" and O'Ballahoe shook his fist at the scoffers. "Do yees think that there isn't any honest min in the wourd?"

"Oh, yes; but we draw the line at Irish lawyers," Charley Diamond replied, perfectly serious.

"I don't put any faith in anything, nowadays," Creegan remarked. "I know you want to serve papers on me, and I've made up my mind that you sha'n't do it. If you succeeded, it would be a point gained, and this game is so deuced close that I can't afford to throw away any points."

"Then you won't l'ave us in?"

"No, sir!" replied the miner, decidedly.

"Well, we'll have to force our way in then!" blustered Mul Kirk.

"Try it on," responded the Black Cloud owner, tersely. "We're all ready for you, and will try to give you a warm reception. Oh, we're hospitable, we are, we miners."

"Upon me wourd ye do me wrong; we're only afther the tin trunk," O'Ballahoe protested.

"You know that it isn't hyer; but to give ye a fair show, if the sheriff will allow himself to be searched by my men, so that I can be sure that he hasn't any legal papers to serve on me, he can come in and search the premises to his heart's content."

But this was exactly what the sheriff protested he wouldn't submit to, and no wonder, for Creegan had guessed the cunning trap which the lawyer had contrived. He hoped by this ruse

to secure admission to the premises, and thus gain a strong legal point.

But defeated in his plan, the two departed amid the jeers of Creegan's friends.

Plainly the mine could only be captured by force.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE SHERIFF IS ASTONISHED.

Two exceedingly dissatisfied men were the sheriff and the lawyer as they retreated from the field of action; the field whereon they had been so ignominiously beaten in the contest of their own choosing.

"Shure that Mike Creegan is the devil's own b'ye," O'Ballahoe remarked, after they had gotten well away from the vicinity of the mine.

"I'd like to break his back!" Mul Kirk exclaimed, savagely.

"Bedad! I'd like to see yees do that same," sympathetically remarked the lawyer.

"And I will do it, too, the furst chance I get," continued the official. "Jest you remember that: jest remember what I say, and see if I won't be as good as my word afore either of us is much older."

"Upon me wourd, ye don't know how glad I'd be for to have yees do that little job. It would be afther taking a h'ape of wourk from me shoulders. This man is the toughest nut I iver tried to crack. Shure, this war as illigant a job as iver the wit of man put up, but the b'aste smashed it right from the beginning."

"Oh, yes, he reckoned we hadn't come fooling round his place with no search-warrant. How astonished he would have been though if he hadn't smelt out the trap when I shoved the paper into his hand! I tell yer, I would have rolled out the words, 'You are served, Mr. Creegan,' with a deal of satisfaction," the sheriff remarked.

"By the piper that played before Moses!" cried the lawyer, "I begin to belave that the only way we can iver serve a paper upon this blaggard will be to use it as wadding for a rifle and fire it at him."

"That wouldn't be a bad idee," remarked the sheriff, in his dullness imagining that the lawyer was speaking in earnest. "But, I say, Pauden, would such a service be legal—'cording to law, you know?"

"What difference does it make whether you shove a paper into a man's hand or fire it into his body?" the Irishman demanded with a sober leer. "Either way gets it into his possession, doesn't it, and isn't that all the law requires?"

"Yes, but I never heard tell of ary sich thing being done."

"It's a big idee, though, me b'ye," responded the other, soberly. "Thry it on this spalpeen and thin ye can sind it out to the wourd as the Mul Kirk way of serving an ugly defendant, and mebbe yees might be able to get a patent on it, and thin think of the fortune ye might accumulate."

"Ye-yes," Mul Kirk said slowly, rather doubtful about the matter, and then he caught a glimpse of a sly twinkle in the eyes of the Irishman, which made him suspect he was being made a victim.

"Go'long with yer, yer durned Paddywhack!" he cried. "You're only jest trying to stuff me, but I ain't fool enough to swallow any sich yarn as that. Blamed if I wouldn't like to shoot the galoot, though."

"Mul Kirk, me b'ye, ag'in I sympathize with yees!" the Irishman exclaimed. "I would like to be afther getting a good crack at the blaggard, meself."

"I reckon that neither one on us, though, will be able to git a chance at him without starting in with all the advantages on his side, and then what show do we stand?"

"A show to be shot, as sure as yees are a living man," relied O'Ballahoe. "This blaggard manes business ivery time. Ye can see that in his eyes. If ye tried to get the drop on him he'd be afther shooting you down with as little mercy as though you were a mad-dog."

"Durn me if I don't believe the cuss would!" the sheriff remarked in a tone of conviction.

"Oh, I'm sure of it!" the Irishman declared. "I know the man of old. He's a quiet feller, not at all given to loud talk, but whin ye draw him out he's p'ison."

"I believe yer!"

"Sure I reckoned that if ye succeeded in serving the paper on him to-night, he'd be mighty apt, in his rage at being tricked, to make an ind of yees."

"The blazes you did!" growled the astonished official, who was considerably disgusted at this information.

"Oh, yes, I know the man, I tell ye. He's quiet, but when ye rouse him k'ape your eyes peeled, or you'll hear something break."

"I was so sure he'd go for yees, if yees succeeded in entrapping him, that I made a bet with Pendragon that he would. He offered to bet me a hundred to fifty that Creegan wouldn't kill yees if he did fly into a rage, and I took him up, 'kase I felt sure if ye succeeded in serving the paper ye would be a dead man."

This intelligence so astonished the sheriff that

he came to a dead halt and stared at the cool-witted Irishman.

"And you kem along with me to-night, feeling sure that if I made the rifle I would be wiped out by that durned galoot?" the official demanded indignantly, his face almost scarlet with rage at the idea.

"Of coorse, me b'ye, that was a part of me little game," answered the lawyer, with a cunning smile.

"A part of yer little game?"

"Yis, don't ye see phat a bould I would have on this blaggard if he killed yees, the sheriff, jist beka'se ye served a paper upon him?" rejoined the lawyer. "Don't ye see it wouldn't be like a free fight, you know, it wouldn't be as if ye had attacked the mine with a posse, and attempted to take the works by main force."

"In such a case as that there would be a great deal of sympathy for him, for the b'yes would say, 'Small blame to the man for fighting for phat he thinks belongs to him,' and the law would be apt to slip if it tried to get a grip upon him, but if he killed you in cold blood and just for serving a process upon him, begorra! I'd be able to hang him as sure as me name is Paudeen O'Ballahoe!"

The sheriff resumed his onward course. For a few minutes his disgust and indignation were so great he could not express himself, but at last he roared out:

"Wa-al, bless my everlasting gizzard! If this hyer ain't the cheekiest piece of work that I ever heerd on in all my born days! Hyer you rope me into this leetle game with the idee that it would be the biggest kind of a joke to fool Mike Creegan, and all the time you was a-calculating he would salivate me and then you could get an under grip on him."

"It's all right, I s'pose. It's one of them smart little tricks that you lawyers git up, but you don't play no more sich games on me."

"What did you come along for? to be a witness and see me killed?"

"Exactly! It's a foine head ye have on ye, Mul Kirk? Don't ye see phat a witness I'd make? I'd hang the feller as sure as there's a rope in the State!" O'Ballahoe replied, and then he heaved a sigh as if he regretted that his finely-conceived plan had gone amiss.

"It's all right," Mul Kirk repeated, yet with a dubious shake of the head. "I'm alive, and I ain't been salivated, but you don't rope me into any more of these games, if I know myself."

"Shure! you've no r'ason to complain. Don't Pendragon pay like a prince?"

"That's all right, too, but if I should happen to git slaughtered, I reckon all the money in the world wouldn't bring me back to life ag'in."

"Oho, that goes widout saying, me b'ye."

"No, no, Paudeen, no more of these pesky leetle sharp tricks in mine, if I know myself, and the court thinks she does. Pendragon pays well enough; I've no reason to complain, and as long as he forks over the cash, I'll do wot I kin for him, but in an open way, mind. No more of these sharp tricks. You can't play me for a fool ag'in."

The Irishman laughed, for he regarded the matter as a deuced good joke.

By this time the pair had reached the hotel where Pendragon had his quarters, and reported to the millionaire how utterly unsuccessful had been the scheme to entrap Mike Creegan.

"I did not think you would make the rifle," Pendragon remarked. "If you remember, O'Ballahoe, I did not have any faith in it, but you were so sanguine good results would follow that I was willing you should try it."

"Wot do you reckon will be the next move, Mr. Pendragon?" the sheriff asked.

"Open force, and it has been my belief from the beginning that nothing else would answer. You must go for Judge McKinney, O'Ballahoe; Jake must give an order empowering us to take possession of the property, and once that is obtained, sheriff, there will not be any difficulty in raising a force to seize the concern."

Mul Kirk shook his head and looked grave. His interview with the defenders of the Black Cloud property that night had opened his eyes somewhat.

"It won't be an easy matter, Mr. Pendragon," he said. "Creegan has got the works fixed jist like a fort; thar's good men thar, too, and it will take a mighty big fight to get 'em out."

"Of coorse, that is to be expected; men don't usually yield property worth half a million without considerable of a struggle, but that is only a question of time and money."

"They'll be apt to fight like blazes, for Mike Creegan's blood is up, and I reckon he'll die right in his tracks thar afore he gives up the property," the sheriff observed.

"I don't doubt that in the least. I calculate that we'll have to kill Creegan and a half-a-dozen of his best men before we can capture the place," Pendragon replied, with perfect coolness. "That is all in the programme, but I'm going to have him out of there the moment I get the sanction of the law, if it takes a thousand men."

"If I get the order and he refuses to obey it, then it puts him in the wrong while we have the right on our side, and if Creegan or any of his men are hurt their blood will be upon their own heads."

"No man has the right to resist the execution of the law, and if he does do it, he alone must be responsible for the consequences."

"I'll raise an army and have that property if it costs me fifty thousand dollars!"

After a few more words the sheriff withdrew, and shortly afterward O'Ballahoe departed.

The lawyer proceeded to the saloon for the purpose of refreshing the inner man with a "nip" of whisky before seeking his couch; but hardly had he disposed of his drink when one of the townsmen entered in search of him.

CHAPTER XXVI.

A MYSTERIOUS CLIENT.

"SAY, Paudeen, I want to speak to you for a moment," said the miner, taking the Irishman toward the door, so that what he had to communicate should not be overheard by the others in the saloon.

"What is it?"

"There's a lady down the street that wants to speak with you."

"With me?" asked the Irishman, in surprise, for his lady acquaintances were few and far between.

"Yes, you're the man she wants."

The lawyer did not understand it, for it was now after ten o'clock, and of the dozen women that dwelt in the town few cared to be abroad at such an hour.

"Who is she?"

"Durned if I know."

"Is she a stranger?"

"You've got me ag'in, O'Ballahoe, although I reckon she is."

"Can't you tell?"

"How in thunder is a man going to tell when she's all muffled up in a cloak and with a thick veil drawn over her face, so that you can't make out whether she is white, black, red, yaller, or all sort of colors mixed."

"Oh, she's kinder disguised, then?"

"I reckon she ain't anxious to let everybody know who she is."

"Are yees shure that it's a woman?" asked the lawyer, who scented danger in this mysterious message.

"Oh, yes."

"It's not a man dressed up like a female with intent to git me out there and thin make me hould up my hands while he goes through me for me small change?" questioned the lawyer, suspiciously.

"Oh, no; thar ain't anything of that kind 'bout the thing, anyhow. It's a lady who wants to see you on special business."

"She hailed me as I was passing along the street, axed me if I knowed you, and if I would please hunt you up, as she wanted to see you on particular business. And she offered me a dollar for my trouble, by gosh!"

"She was liberal."

"You bet! of coorse I wouldn't have it, but it showed the right kind of spirit, you know. Say!" cried the man, abruptly, "who is this gal, anyway? Hev you been a-gitting into any woman scrape?"

"Not much, me b'ye," the lawyer responded with a laugh. "I'm not the kind of gentleman that the females bother. It's a client, mebber, who wants my advice about some difficult and delicate matter, perhaps, and who is anxious not to have the fore-front of her face seen by iv'ry blaggard."

"Yes; she said she had been to your office but you were not thar."

"Oh, it's a client, to be shure; where is she?" and the lawyer opened the door.

"She's standing in the entry-way of your office."

"All right; much obliged for your trouble, and if yees ever get into a mess, bedad! I'm the b'ye that will pull yees out, and make no charge for it, either."

"Bully for you! Say, O'Ballahoe!" cried the miner, as the lawyer passed through the doorway, "if she pans out well, will you give me a stake?"

"Oh, yis; you can depind upon it!"

Down the street went O'Ballahoe; his office was only a few houses away, being situated in the second story over Solomon Oppenheim's store.

The lady apparently recognized him as he approached, for she came to the threshold of the entry.

Although the entry-way boasted a door, yet it was rarely used.

There were a half-dozen small apartments used as offices and sleeping-rooms over the store, and as a rule none of the occupants of the second story ever took the trouble to close the door after them.

Thanks to the moonlight, the lawyer was enabled to get a good view of the unknown.

She was about the medium hight, dressed plainly in black, wearing for an outward garment a "water-proof" cloak. Her head was covered by a small, dark hat, around which a heavy veil was wound, and the veil was so adjusted that it completely concealed her face.

The outlines of her figure were so well covered by her cloak that it was almost an impossibility for O'Ballahoe to decide whether the figure was a familiar one or not.

As far as he could judge though, the woman was a stranger to him.

"Mr. O'Ballahoe?" said the unknown, in a tone of question as he came up.

"Yis, ma'am, that is my name," the lawyer replied, with a polite bow.

He was a true Irishman, and never forgot the civility due to the softer sex.

"You are a lawyer, I believe."

"I have the honor to belong to that honorable profession."

"I wish to ask your advice upon an important matter," she said, with a slight hesitation.

"I am aware that this is not exactly the proper time to ask for a consultation, but I am not able to arrange it otherwise."

"Don't sp'ake of it, ma'am!" O'Ballahoe hastened to exclaim, with another profound bow.

"The members of the legal profession, I am proud to say, are educated not to be affther being surprised at anything. There may be a hundred r'asons why this time is more convanient for yees than any other."

"It is not for the likes of me, ma'am, to ax yees why this time suits you better than another; I am at the command of me clients any hour that suits their convanience, and it doesn't matter the worth of two pins to me which wan of the twenty-four it is."

By this time the Irishman was certain that the lady was a stranger to him, certain also that she was a lady, for the cultivated tones of her voice as well as her manner of speaking revealed to him that she wasn't any common woman, and he had quickly arrived at the conclusion from the mysterious way in which she had come, as well as by the pains she was taking to keep her identity concealed, that she would in all likelihood turn out to be a valuable client.

From these extraordinary cases come big fees.

"If you will be affther having the kindness to come up-stairs to me office, we shall be free from interruption there, but if we talk here every man that passes by will stop to stare his two eyes out at us."

"Yes, sir."

With another one of his elaborate bows, O'Ballahoe made his way past the lady toward the stairs.

"In about tin steps, ma'am, and ye'll strike the stairs," he said, as he advanced through the darkness with the assurance of one by long experience familiar with the surroundings. "I'm at the fut of thim now. I'll run up, ma'am, and git a light so you'll be able to see where yees are going, and not run the risk of breaking your delicate nose."

"Thank you," she replied.

Then the lawyer hastened up-stairs, unlocked the door of his office, procured a lamp and lit it, then turned to light his client up the stairs, but she had found her way without assistance, and was now standing in the doorway.

"Aha, ma'am, yees are too quick for me," he remarked, then he placed a chair, invited her to be seated, and drew the curtains of the windows down.

There were two windows in the room, and both looked out into the main street.

"There's a curious lot of blaggards in the town," the Irishman remarked, as he arranged the curtains, "and if they saw a light here they would be affther going on the other side of the way so as to gape in, bad 'cess to their manners."

The curtains adjusted and the door closed, the lawyer helped himself to a chair, and announced that he was ready for business.

"Is it necessary that you should know who I am?" she asked slowly, "or can I remain unknown, which I would prefer to do, unless it is imperative it should be otherwise?"

"If it doesn't concern the business upon which you want advice it doesn't matter two wags of a goat's tail to me, ma'am," O'Ballahoe replied. "You can plase yourself about that, and you will plase me."

"My identity has nothing at all to do with the business."

"Thin I will call yees Miss Smith, that's a n'ate name, and aisy to remimber," said the lawyer, with one of his peculiar grins.

He said "Miss," instead of "Mrs.," for he was satisfied she was young in years, whether married or single.

"That will answer as well as any other name."

Then from her pocket she drew forth a wallet, selected a ten-dollar bill from a small roll of bank-notes and passed it to O'Ballahoe.

"There is ten dollars as a retaining fee," she said. "Is that sufficient?"

"Oh, yis, that will do, m'cely," replied the lawyer, crumpling the bill and stowing it away in his vest-pocket.

O'Ballahoe was paid a liberal salary by the millionaire, Pendragon, but his insensate thirst for whisky kept him always poor.

In fact, as a general rule, his salary was all spent before he received it.

And when this unexpected windfall came in his way immediately visions of a glorious spree rose before him.

"I shouldn't have required it from a lady like yourself, beka'se I can see wid half an eye from the way yees have gone about it that yees mane business every time, but I'm too old a lawyer to

iver refuse a fee when it is tendered! That would be high treason to the profession," and he laughed at his own jest.

"I wish certain information to be procured."

"Yis."

"About a certain party."

"Of coorse."

"The inquiry must be conducted secretly, for it is important that no one should know that it has been set on foot," she continued, earnestly.

"That can be arranged as easily as rowling off a log; trust me for that!" exclaimed O'Ballahoe, confidently. "The name of the party is—"

"Nebraska Blake."

CHAPTER XXVII.

MORE MYSTERY.

THE unexpected utterance took the lawyer completely by surprise, and despite his professional caution, he could not avoid betraying that he was astonished.

The lady was apparently a keen observer, for she noticed upon the instant how the Irishman was affected by her disclosure.

"You seem to be surprised," she said; "therefore I judge the story of Nebraska Blake is not unknown to you."

"Well, yes, I must admit I didn't expect in the past to hear anything about that young man. Of coorse I know his story. Sorra a man in the town unless he is a new-comer that doesn't. It's a most mysterious affair, and the more wan thinks of it the greater becomes the wonder as to what has become of the b'ye."

"Of coorse I assume that my Nebraska Blake and your Nebraska Blake are wan and the same. I refer to the son of old man Blake, who was interested in the Black Cloud strike, the man who was instrumental in founding this camp, and from whom it takes its name."

"Yes, that is the Nebraska Blake whom I mean, the young man who mysteriously disappeared some years ago, and of whose fate no particulars have ever been received."

"The identical chap. Upon me wourd, ma'am, it was wan of the strangest cases that I iver heard of, and in my time I have been an actor in many queer affairs."

"You see, ma'am, before I came West I practiced law in New York, and did a great d'ale in the criminal line, so I'm well posted."

"I see," she remarked. "I think you are right about the Blake case. I doubt if a more mysterious one was ever known. If I understand the matter rightly, not a single clew in regard to his fate has ever been received."

"Not wan."

"He disappeared as utterly as though the earth had opened and engulfed him."

"You put it both, n'ately and correctly, ma'am."

"There isn't any mistake then. He is the man I mean."

"Upon me conscience, ma'am!" exclaimed O'Ballahoe, abruptly, "I might as well give you back your ten dollars, for it would only be down-right robbery to take it with the idea of finding out what has become of Nebraska Blake, for the task would be too much for the likes of me."

"Perhaps, ma'am, ye are not aware that the young man's father has spent a small fortune in thrying to find out phat happened to his b'ye."

"Yes, I understand that such was the case," the woman replied, and to the quick ears of the lawyer it seemed as though there was a sadness in the voice which he had not noticed there before.

"Shure! old man Blake spint money as though it was no more than water!" O'Ballahoe declared.

"He had detectives by the score; not the l'aste bit of expinse did he spare, and it wasn't till his health gave way and he became physically broken down that he gave up the search, although everybody felt sure a long time before the old man stopped that he was only wasting both time and money."

"What was the general belief in regard to the fate of the young man?" the mysterious lady asked.

"Most people thought he was dead. He was traced from Denver to St. Louis, although it was a difficult job, and the detectives themselves were not absolutely certain that the man whose track they had located was really Nebraska Blake, or some other feller that resembled him, but there was a r'asonable probability that they were on the right scent."

"At St. Louis, though, the trail ended, and not the slightest evidence could be discovered that the young man whom the detectives believed to be Nebraska Blake had ever left St. Louis."

"To my mind the fate of the young man is clear. He had considerable money on his person, and being a generous, impulsive feller, open-hearted and as good-natured as the day is long, it was the 'asiest thing in the wourd for some sharpers to l'ade him away."

"There was, probably—excuse me for saying anything that may seem to reflect upon the tinder sex—a woman in the case. Some beautiful decoy—a lineal descendant of the siren whose sole business it was to lure the Greek sailors up-

on the hidden rocks where destruction awaited their barks and death stood ready to seize themselves—exerted her fascinations to induce the young man to visit some obscure retreat, where he was drugged and killed, after being robbed, on the principle, you know, that dead men tell no tales."

"Of coorse, his body was quietly got out of the way, so that its discovery would not l'ade to the apprehension of the murderers."

"This is my theory, ma'am; this is what I believe became of Nebraska Blake. You'll excuse my ringing in the woman, but as in my theory she is a most important part, I couldn't very well l'ave her out."

A little, bitter laugh, in which no trace of real honest merriment could be detected, escaped from the woman's lips.

"You are a believer, I see, in the doctrine of the ancient sage who declared that women were at the bottom of all the mischief in the world," she remarked, her voice quite harsh and repellent.

"Oh, no, ma'am; the saints forbid!" O'Ballahoe hastened to exclaim; "I have the highest respect in the wourd for the female sex, no man has more; it is a noted characteristic of me nation, for I'm proud to say I am a son of the Emerald Isle, but in this case I feel almost certain that there is a woman in the case."

"But as I said before, ma'am, it isn't of any use for me to undertake to find out what has become of Nebraska Blake when some of the best detectives in the land, with instructions to spare neither time nor money, failed."

"You don't exactly comprehend what I wish," she replied, coldly. "I do not come to employ you to ascertain what has become of the young man, for I am aware as well as you that the task would be beyond your powers."

"Phat is it, thin, ma'am?" O'Ballahoe asked, decidedly puzzled by the speech.

"I believe you are the confidential adviser of Mr. Pendragon?" she said, abruptly.

"Yes, ma'am, I have that honor," replied the lawyer, somewhat surprised at this sudden turn to the conversation.

"Will you pardon me for asking if your relations with Mr. Pendragon are of such a character that you are obliged to make known to him the particulars of any business that may be entrusted to your care—business that does not concern him or his interests in the least?"

"Certainly not," the lawyer answered, immediately. "Although I devote almost all of me time to his affairs, yet by the terms of my agreement with him I am allowed to attend to any private business that may come in my way, and any disclosure that you may make to me will be as sacredly respected as though you were a penitent and I a praste."

"So sp'ake freely and widout fear."

"I want information of Nebraska Blake, not in regard to his fate, for he has not come to the end of his line yet, being still alive."

"Upon me wourd yees have astounded me!" exclaimed the lawyer, and this was the actual truth, for O'Ballahoe was not prepared for such a revelation.

"It is the truth; do not ask me how I know, for that matters not. Nebraska Blake is not only alive but is in Blakeville this very minute."

"Oho! now yees are afther piling wonder on wonder!"

"Not in his own proper person, mind, not walking about openly as Nebraska Blake, but lurking in the background in disguise."

"Aha! by me life! this is getting more and more mysterious!"

"Now then, what I wish to discover is what disguise Nebraska Blake has assumed. I am anxious to know what he calls himself, and I rely upon you to ascertain that fact for me; can it be done?"

"Yis, if yees can give me a single clew to work upon."

"I can," the woman replied, immediately. "He is in communication with some of the Black Cloud mine people. Or if he isn't now, he will open communication soon. In order to discover him a watch must be kept upon the mine and all connected with it."

"That's aisy done but it will cost money, for it must be done n'ately and secretly."

The woman counted out a hundred dollars into the hand of the amazed Irishman.

"Is that enough to begin on?" she asked.

"Oh, yis, this will do."

"Set to work instantly; have the mine watched by day and night."

"I'll have the job done in the n'atest possible manner."

"If any stranger is holding secret communications with any of the mine people, that stranger is surely Nebraska Blake."

"But I don't understand why he should cons'ale himself under a disguise," said the puzzled lawyer.

"He probably has good reasons for what he is doing. Did you ever see the original of this picture?" she asked, placing a cheap-looking photograph in O'Ballahoe's hand.

It represented the head and bust of a young man, a rather good-looking young fellow with regular features, rather long hair and a short beard.

The picture evidently was a poorly-executed one, and probably did not do justice to the original.

"The features seem rather familiar," the lawyer remarked, "yet I'm not shure I know the party."

"He is an associate of Nebraska Blake, and is in this camp or its neighborhood, but no doubt disguised. If you can succeed in finding him, Blake will not be far off."

"All right; I'll kape my eyes open, and thin I know a couple of bright chaps that I can put on the watch, widout letting them know exactly what the game is. They'll do the wourk, but be in the dark as to phat they're doing."

"Very well, that will do for the present," and the woman rose and advanced to the door, the lawyer politely accompanying her. "In three nights I will meet you here."

"All right; phat is the name of this other young man?"

"He calls himself John Denver," and then she departed.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A COLORADO JUDGE.

JUDGE JAKE MCKINNEY sat in his office in the town of Del Norte, the county seat of Rio Grande county.

With him was closeted the Irish lawyer, O'Ballahoe.

The clock, ticking on the wall, had marked the hour of ten; the window-curtains were closely drawn, so that no ray of light could be seen from the outside to indicate that the office was occupied.

The two men, who were separated by the long table which stood in the center of the apartment, and upon which they leaned, were gazing earnestly upon each other and had exactly the look of conspirators who had met to overthrow a government.

O'Ballahoe had just entered, and the judge, who had been awaiting him, casting anxious glances at the clock, expressed his satisfaction that he had arrived at last.

But before we proceed further we must devote a few words to Judge Jake McKinney, as he was usually termed.

As the reader will probably guess from the familiar way in which the public at large handled his name, the judge was "one of the boys."

In person he was a great, beefy kind of a man, thick-set, broad-shouldered and bull-necked, chuckle-headed—just the kind of man that an artist would have drawn had he been requested to produce an ideal prize-fighter.

And the man of the pencil would not have been so far out of the way, either, for Jake McKinney, in his young days, had been one of the toughest lads the great city of New York could boast of at the time.

This was in the old days, for the judge was now a man of fifty odd—the days of the volunteer fire department, when to run with the "masheen" and be able to whip a tough antagonist were the sure roads to political preferment.

But an unfortunate accident made Jake a wanderer in the wilds of the West, and so lost to the Empire State a citizen who bid fair in time to make a name equal to any of the "b'boys" who were in after years to represent, or misrepresent, as the reader chooses, the great State of the Union in the council-halls at Albany and Washington.

He had the ill-luck to hammer an opponent at a fire one night so severely that the man never recovered from his injuries, and as the sufferer had influential friends they made it so particularly warm for the conqueror that he was forced to fly for his life.

What the effete East had cast out the young and vigorous West gladly received.

Jake was one of the pioneers in Colorado, made money in the, to him, congenial occupation of keeping a whisky-ranch, and then finally got into politics, and by the time that his adopted home arrived at the dignity of Statehood, the ex-liquor-dealer had become quite a notable man.

To do McKinney justice, he had striven earnestly to fit himself for the high station to which his fellow citizens—aided by the political ring to which he belonged, who packed the nominating conventions in his favor—had called him.

He had studied diligently, and being by nature possessed of a certain amount of shrewdness and low cunning, managed to get along tolerably well.

McKinney, though, was just the kind of a man who could be used by a rich and unscrupulous speculator of the Pendragon stamp.

"Well well!" the judge exclaimed, after the Irishman had entered and helped himself to a seat, "I am glad you've come at last. I was beginning to get tired of waiting, and had just about come to the conclusion that you never would show up. You are fully an hour late."

"I was detained," O'Ballahoe explained. "I rode over from Blakeville, and as I was afraid to come alone, I had to wait until I could be afther getting my crowd together."

"Afraid to come alone!" the judge exclaimed, not able to comprehend why the lawyer should have any cause for fear.

"Yis, I was afeard I might be stopped, you know."

"Well, O'Ballahoe, I never suspected you carried around so much money or other valuables as to make it worth while for any road-agent to 'hold you up,'" McKinney observed, a touch of sarcasm in the speech, for the lawyer was one of the great army of men who are never known to possess any money, being always hard up and on the borrow.

"Right ye are, me jewel!" exclaimed O'Ballahoe, with a laugh, quick to understand the insinuation. "I grant yeez that, as a general rule, the thafe of a road-agent that would be afther taking the trouble to make me stand and deliver, would have mighty little but his labor for his pains, but to-night I am well heeled, financially, and not only that, but I have some valuable documents on me that I wouldn't be afther losing for a trifle."

"That is something out of the common."

"Yis, and that's the r'ason why I waited for me body-guard to assemble. Mebbe ye remember that Larry Pendragon was on his way to see yeez whin he was robbed in Hell's Canyon?"

"Yes, I remember the circumstance."

"And mightily mysterious it was, too. Pendragon took the precaution to go by that unfrequented way jist so as to avoid trouble, and no wan but meself knew that he had the papers wid him, or the way he was going."

"Yet he was 'held up' by a blaggard who seemed to know as much about Pendragon's business as he did himself."

"Oh, yes, I remember now, and the same fellow went for Larry again in a wood just outside of Del Norte here."

"That's the man!"

"And got away with five hundred thousand dollars' worth of bonds. Blazes! I tell you what it is, O'Ballahoe, that was a haul worth making!"

"Indade it was, and the worst of the matter is that Pendragon can't get the l'aste clew to the rapscaillon, although the circular which he has out has been distributed far and wide. Another strange thing about that little transaction, too, was that only Pendragon and meself knew that the bonds were in the tin trunk at the bankers' office at Santa Fé."

"Mighty suspicious, old fellow," the judge remarked, with a knowing shake of the head. "If I stood in Pendragon's shoes I'm afraid I should be inclined to think you had a finger in the pie."

"Oh, I know it looks that way," replied the Irishman, without taking the least offense at the insinuation, "but sorra a man that steps his fut on the earth can say that I was ever known to betray a fri'nd or a client, and I'd be a great fool indade to wourk ag'in' Pendragon, who makes me phat I am."

"It would be ugly for you, though, if he should get the idea in his head," the judge suggested.

"Oh, don't run away with the idea that Pendragon is a fool, beka'se you will be wrong if you do; anybody that fries him for a fool will lose his fat," the Irishman replied, in his easy way. "He knows that it looks as if I was the man that has given the thing away, but he knows too that there isn't money enough in the world to induce me to do anything of the sort."

"The trouble is wid the rooms at the hotel where Pendragon has his head-quarters. We have talked the business over there, niver thinking that any spalpeen could be afther hearing us, but it's plain that some devil has contrived it so we can be overheard, and that is the way it has come about."

"Yes, yes," the judge observed, slowly, "it might be accounted for in that way."

"There isn't the l'aste taste of a doubt about it, but this time we are afther getting the better of the rapscaillon, for we arranged all the details of this trip at me office, and I fixed it so as to have an escort of b'yes, and here I am all right wid the documents."

And as he spoke, O'Ballahoe drew from an inside pocket of his coat a bundle of legal-looking papers.

"Now, judge," he continued, "I want ye to look over these papers, and thin give me an order appointing me rec'aver of the Black Cloud property."

"The sheriff is all ready wid a small army to put me in possession of the works the moment I put into his fist the order from yeez. I've no doubt that we'll be afther having a lively fight, but as we've got the min and the money, in time we'll have the mine, if we have to kill ivery mother's son that's in it."

The judge opened the legal documents and examined them carefully, and as he proceeded in his task every now and then he shook his head in a dubious sort of way as if he was not quite satisfied with the papers.

At last he finished the examination and leaning back in his chair remarked:

"I don't really see, O'Ballahoe, how I can do what you require."

"Hav'n't I made out a clear case and a strong wan?"

"Well, no, I don't think you have. There are some important links missing, and you ought to know that I am so situated just now that I can't

afford to take any chances. I'm a candidate for reelection, and I must play my cards so the opposite party can't get any chance to get up a hue and cry against me. These mining squabbles are always ugly things for a man to get mixed up in anyway."

"If I issue this order without good and sufficient grounds—good legal grounds, you know, all the newspapers will be howling about my trampling upon the rights of the hard-working miners—the poor man, you see, and I must have the miners' vote, or else I stand no show at all. In fact, to tell you the honest truth, I would rather not have anything to do with the matter in any way."

"Here's a thousand good reasons why you should issue the order," said the lawyer, sarcastically, and he drew from his pocket ten one-hundred-dollar bills and placed them one by one upon the table.

The dull eyes of the judge sparkled, and involuntarily he bent forward, and then, recollecting himself, he resumed his former position.

"Very good reasons, indeed, Paudeen," he remarked, "and under other circumstances probably they would be sufficient; but, old fellow, my judgeship is worth more than a thousand dollars, and if I go into this thing it may defeat me."

"If you don't go into it, Pendragon will have to go ag'in' yeez; I know he'd hate to do it, but business is business, you perca'va. The man who is not for us, is ag'in' us. And if you stretch the law a little in this matter, what of it? The best judges in the world do make a mistake, sometimes; it's only a legal error, that's all."

"I'll fix ye up an opinion that will make it as plain as the nose on your face that ye acted according to your best judgment, and shure mortal man can't do more."

"You've got a mighty persuasive way about you, O'Ballahoe," observed the judge, with a chuckle.

"Oh, yis; but here's something that's better than words," and the lawyer drew out ten more one-hundred-dollar bills and placed them on top of the first pile.

"I reckon your arguments are correck, Paudeen; you can have the order."

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE BARGAIN.

Two thousand dollars in hard cash, and the promise of the millionaire's influence in the approaching political contest was too much for the judge, and though he felt sure his granting the order, without giving the other party a chance to be heard, would be certain to kick up a tremendous row, yet he thought with Pendragon's backing he would be able to pull through in the coming election.

"Yes, yes; it's only a mistake, after all," the judge observed, as he drew the pile of bills over to his side of the table and began to smooth out the creases in the paper with a vast deal of satisfaction.

"My enemies all say that I'm no lawyer anyway, and never ought to have been elected judge, and so if I blunder in this little affair, no one can possibly say anything worse of me than has been said."

"True for yees!" O'Ballahoe exclaimed. "Ye niver spoke more correctly in yer life, so give me the order, me jewel, and niver fear for the election. If there's a row kicked up about this matter, Pendragon will be bound to see yer through, and he'll do it, too, for whin his blood is up he'll spind his money like wather, and that's the kind of a man he is."

"Make me a draft of the order and I'll fix it up for you."

The lawyer was quick to obey, and after the document was completed McKinney copied and signed it and then handed the paper to O'Ballahoe.

"There ye have it; there's the order to take the mine, but I reckon from what I know of Mike Creegan and his pals you'll have a deuce of a fight before you get possession of the property."

"His blood will be upon his own head if he resists the peaceful processes of the law," replied O'Ballahoe, with a sly wink at the judge as he folded up the paper, McKinney at the same time stowing away the hundred-dollar bills in his capacious wallet.

"Ye see wid this little order in me fist Mike Creegan will be in a bad box if he attempts to resist the process of the law."

"Oh, he'll resist beyond a doubt and give you a mighty hard fight for the property, for I understand he has turned the mine into a regular fort."

"Yis, so I have heard. Well, I can tell Mister Mike Creegan that if he shows fight and hurts anybody on our side, he'll stand a foine chance of being tried for murder, and maybe he'll come so near the gallows that there won't be afther being any fun in it."

"You see that's the p'int I'm afther wourking for; I want to put him in the wrong, do ye mind? I want to go ahead wid the law on my side and then we'll be all right."

"You're fixed now, but I don't envy you the job; you'll have the toughest kind of a time in getting him out of the property."

"Oh, we're going at him wid such a force that it will be madness for him to attempt to resist."

We'll have tin min to every wan of his and, shure, if they are not all crazy they will not be afther fighting ag'in' such odds."

"Well, I don't know about that," the judge replied, with a shake of the head. "These miners are desperate fellers sometimes, and the law here don't have the pull on men that it does in the East."

"Shure! I know that; 'ach man is a law unto himself on the frontier, but we're getting civilized now and we ought to get rid of that foolishness. It will only take a couple of big fights, like this wan that we're going into now to t'ache these hard-headed galoots that the reign of the revolver and bowie-knife are over and the majesty of the civil law must be respected."

"By-by, I'm off! me body-guard is below waiting to escort me back to the camp. This murdering thafe of a road-agent has been making himself so free wid Pendragon, that I was afraid he might get wind I had come on Larry's business and go for me, so I jest took measures to prevint him from holding me up."

"There's not any chance for him to overhear what has taken place between us to-night, for though walls have ears I reckon there ain't any 'round us jest now," McKinney remarked.

"True for yees! So-long!"

And away went the lawyer to join his escort, who had "gone into camp" on the stoop of the house.

"Now, b'yes, we'll take a quiet drink and then we'll be afther l'aving," said O'Ballahoe, as he joined the others.

The party mounted their horses, rode down to the hotel, procured their refreshments, and then set out for Blakeville.

The judge watched them ride away, peeping through the window by the side of the curtain, and then returned to the table, where he stood for a moment in meditation.

"I've been too quick in this business," he said at last. "I'm allers too durned eager. If I had held out and made all sorts of objections to issuing the order, I reckon I could have struck Pendragon for five thousand just as easily as two. He's so hot arter this thing that he would never have stood for a few thousand dollars."

"Well, well, I'll know better next time. If I get another chance at him, which is likely, I'll go for him in a way he'll despise. I'll jest make his pocket-book howl, you bet!"

"Now I'll douse the glim"—the judge had not forgotten the slang of his early days—"and then for home and bed."

Going to the table, he extinguished the coal-oil lamp by means of which the apartment was lighted.

Being so familiar with the room, he would have no difficulty in finding his way out in the dark.

Just as the flame of the lamp flickered and expired, the judge fancied he heard a slight noise as though some one was at the door.

"I wonder if O'Ballahoe has forgotten anything and is coming back," was the thought that flashed across his mind.

He listened, but heard nothing.

"My imagination must have deceived me," he murmured.

The room was plunged in utter darkness, for, as we have described, all the curtains were down, so it was impossible for McKinney to see even his own hand, resting upon the lamp.

"It's mighty strange what tricks a man's imagination will play upon him sometimes," the judge soliloquized, as he bestowed a parting glance in the direction of the lamp so as to be certain he had extinguished the flame.

"I would have been willing to take my oath that I heard some one at the door."

Hardly had he uttered the words when a most astounding phenomenon occurred.

The apartment had become suddenly illuminated, not brightly, but with a dull, subdued light, just as if the rays of a bright full moon were streaming into the room, partially obscured by a gauzy curtain.

But the light did not come from the direction of the windows, but from the door which was in the side of the room and toward which the judge had his back.

The first intimation that Judge McKinney had of the mysterious light was when he saw it appear on the opposite wall.

McKinney could hardly believe the evidence of his eyes, and then when he saw that his vision had not betrayed him, and the light was no creature of his imagination, a sort of nervous thrill passed over him, for there seemed to be something uncanny, approaching the supernatural about the matter.

The judge, like the majority of brutal, ignorant men, was decidedly superstitious, and, being so, it was not wonderful that this mysterious light should make goose-flesh all over him.

Slowly he turned his head and looked toward the door; he expected to behold something out of the common there, and he was not disappointed.

The door was closed, and there, with his back against it, stood the strangely-attired road-agent with the unearthly face from whence the supernatural-like light emanated.

For a moment the judge's breath came hard and quick, and then suddenly into his mind came

the knowledge of who and what this mysterious visitor was.

He was face to face with the road-agent who had twice played it upon Larry Pendragon in a way that that gentleman had despised.

Instinctively the judge's hand sought the revolver which he wore belted to his waist underneath his coat.

He understood the game well enough now.

The road-agent had been lurking in the entry, and after O'Ballahoe departed had advanced to the door, and then taken advantage of the moment when the light was extinguished to open the door carefully and steal into the apartment, the darkness rendering this movement possible, although extremely difficult.

This accounted for the noise which McKinney fancied he had heard.

Instead of any one trying the door, it was the intruder shutting it.

McKinney's ears had not deceived him after all, and now that the first shock of the surprise was over, he felt inclined to offer battle to the intruder particularly as the road-agent did not display any weapon.

But hardly had the judge's grasp sought the butt of his pistol when the right hand of the Unknown rose quickly and McKinney found himself covered by a leveled revolver.

"Go slow!" commanded the road-agent, in a hoarse, unnatural voice.

The judge glared at the speaker, his hand on his revolver, and he felt strongly tempted to draw it.

But it was evident that the road-agent was an expert reader of faces—one of the sharps who by the expression on a man's face was able to comprehend what was passing in his mind for no sooner did the judge form the idea of drawing his revolver than up came the hammer of the already aimed weapon in the right hand of the Unknown, and he said:

"Don't, Judge Jake McKinney, don't attempt to draw your tool, or I shall be obliged to fix you so that there will be a vacancy in the list of Colorado judges."

CHAPTER XXX.

THE ROAD-AGENT TURNS LAWYER.

JAKE MCKINNEY was no coward; he came of the bull-dog breed, and had proved time and time again that personal danger did not appall him, but for all that, there was something in the voice and manner of the road-agent which caused him to relinquish his grasp on the revolver.

He had been caught at a terrible disadvantage and was wise enough to comprehend the danger of his position.

A scoundrel bold enough to take the risk which the road-agent had braved by intruding into his office would assuredly not hesitate at the commission of any crime.

The judge was a brave man, but he was not anxious to die just at present, and he was sensible enough not to provoke an encounter with the advantages all on the side of his opponent.

"Aha!" quoth the road-agent, as the hand of the judge came from under the coat, "I see you are inclined to listen to reason, and I have no doubt we shall get on very well together. I like to deal with sensible men. You see I have the drop on you, and I reckon you kin read in my eyes that I would plug you in a minute if I thought you were going to be ugly, for that is the kind of man I am, jest as gentle as a kitten if you treat me well, but if you go to rise my hair and git my dander up, then I'm on the fight from the word go!"

"What do you want?" asked the judge, shortly, annoyed at being thus taken at a disadvantage. "My pocket-book and valuables, I suppose?"

"Waal, I reckon you're a pretty good guesser generally, but you haven't hit it this time, judge."

"The fact is I've come to you on professional business."

"Professional business!" exclaimed McKinney, in astonishment.

"Yes, I don't believe you've got the hang of what kind of a man I am anyway, ha, ha, ha!" and the mysterious visitor laughed in an unearthly, uncanny way.

The judge, despite the fact that he knew there was some trick about the man with his ghost-like face, felt a sudden chill creep over him, for the lower part of the face alone seemed to be endowed with life.

The lips and the muscles of the mouth moved when he spoke, but the upper part of the face no more stirred than if it was carved out of marble.

Then, too, by what mysterious means was the light produced which came from the face with sufficient power to dimly illuminate the apartment?

The intruder was a man, of course, a man got up in this ghostly manner for the express purpose of inspiring terror, so Jake McKinney reasoned, but the superstition that was latent in him whispered that this man must either be more than mortal or else one aided by the evil spirits of another world.

"Suppose you explain what you want," said

the judge, striving with all his power to appear cool and indifferent.

"Light the lamp and sit down," responded the visitor.

"Light the lamp?"

"Yes; I've got a heap of business with you. I've come to see you on some important legal matters, and I reckon when we come to signing papers that we will need a little more light on the subject than we have at present, so light the lamp, and be quick about it, too, for I haven't any time to waste."

McKinney did not know exactly what to make of this, but as he was in the stranger's power he complied with the request.

There were matches on the table; the judge, from long habit, knew exactly where to put his hand upon them, and in a few moments the gleam of the lamp illuminated the room.

And just as McKinney finished the task, the road-agent, upon whom the judge had turned his back, deftly lifted up McKinney's coat-tail and drew the judge's revolver from its holster.

This idea of a man of Judge McKinney's station carrying a revolver belted to his person—like a cowboy, may seem a little far-fetched to the reader who is not posted in regard to the manners and customs of the Far West, but it is nothing but the literal truth.

Few men of prominence in the mining regions of the West and on the Pacific slope but what go armed, particularly men of the McKinney stamp, who by arbitrary methods make dangerous enemies.

About the only difference between the cowboys and the gentlemen in this matter is that the lesser desperado buckles his weapons to his waist so that everybody can see them, while the representative of the upper ten conceals his shooting-irons under his coat.

The trick was so neatly performed that the judge had no suspicion he was being operated upon until the job was done, and then he turned quickly, as if from a vague, indefinite apprehension that something wrong was taking place behind his back.

He was not astonished, therefore, although considerably annoyed, when he saw his revolver in the hand of the road-agent.

The Unknown, too, had taken advantage of the judge's occupation to cover his odd face with a plain black mask, which, reaching from the forehead to the chin, did not allow a vestige of the features to be seen.

But through two holes in the mask shone the eyes of the man, and to McKinney's astonishment they seemed to be gleaming with a yellow, reddish tint like two balls of fire.

Eyes far more like the orbs of some wild beast, a night-prowler of the cat tribe, than those appertaining to the human kind.

A hoarse, jeering laugh came from the lips of the man as he beheld the look of anger appear upon the judge's face when he discovered the loss of his revolver.

"I reckon we will git along better," he said, "if I take keer of your barker for a while. I should hate to hurt you, judge, but if you took it into your head to git ugly, thinking, maybe, you would git a chance to pull your pop on me, why, then I should have to plug you, and I wouldn't hesitate to do it, Judge Jake McKinney, 'cos I am jest old business, every time."

"You've got me in a tight place, of course, so what is the use of talking about it," retorted McKinney, angrily, for the stealing of the revolver completely upset the plan which he had formed.

He intended to throw the road-agent off his guard by a ready compliance with his demands and then, watching a favorable opportunity, he hoped to get a chance to draw his revolver and "go" for the intruder "red-hot."

The unexpected action of the Unknown frustrated this clever scheme, and the judge came to the conclusion that the man was no common foot-pad—no vulgar bravo depending upon brute force only, but a fellow gifted with brains, and who could plan as well as act.

"I'm glad to see that you recognize the fact," replied the other, "and we'll get right down to solid business now."

"Sit down and put on your thinking-cap; are you ready to open court?"

"To open court?" exclaimed McKinney, amazed, not knowing what to make of this strange matter.

"That is what I said and that is what I mean. Are you ready to transact legal business right off the handle?"

"Yes, I suppose so."

"Well, then, I want an order from you in this Black Cloud mine business."

The judge started in astonishment. This was something entirely unexpected.

"The Black Cloud mine business!" he exclaimed.

"That's the lead that I'm a-follering jest now. You've jest had an interview with O'Ballahoe, who represents Larry Pendragon in this business, and now I want a hearing—I want some show for my white alley. I represent the other side, Mike Creegan and old man Blake."

"Are you a lawyer?" demanded McKinney, totally nonplused at this unexpected turn of affairs.

"You kin jest bet your bottom dollar I am!" the road-agent cried. "And the liveliest limb of a lawyer that ever wagged a tongue in a court-room."

"Oh, I kin do this business right up to the handle, and to show you how well posted I am, let me tell you I know exactly what O'Ballahoe was after to-night."

"You do, eh?"

"Oh, you bet! He came to git an order appointing him receiver of the mine, and the sheriff stands ready with a big gang of fighting-men to put him in possession of the property the moment he has the sanction of the law to go ahead."

"Now I would have settled this matter without troubling you if the Irishman hadn't been smart enough to come with a body-guard."

"If he had tried to make the raffle alone, I would have gone for him in some nice lonely place and relieved him of the order, but as that game is blocked, I want you to help me out by giving me an order appointing Mike Creegan to the receivership; then if Larry Pendragon and the sheriff want a fight they kin have it, but not with the law on their side."

"But this is ridiculous; I have already given an order."

"Due to O'Ballahoe's arguments and legal p'ints, I presume?"

"Yes, most certainly; he made out a strong case."

"Any stronger than this?" and the road-agent cocked the judge's revolver and leveled it directly at his head.

"You give me that order inside of ten seconds or I'll send your soul to everlasting fires!"

A cold perspiration broke out all over McKinney.

He felt that he was in the power of a man who would not hesitate to keep his word.

At last the judge had met his master.

"Don't fire, I will give you the order!" he cried.

"And let it be the last one you issue in this case, if you value your life," the road-agent cautioned.

Ten minutes later the mysterious Unknown departed with the paper duly executed, much to the satisfaction of McKinney.

"There's trouble ahead for Larry Pendragon," the judge muttered.

CHAPTER XXXI.

IN THE CANYON.

"YES, yes," the judge continued, staring blankly at the door through which the road-agent had departed, "there's going to be a bigger fight about this Black Cloud property than Pendragon anticipates."

"But who is this feller, and why does he take any interest in the matter?"

"He's a stranger I'm pretty certain; I know all the men in and about Blakeville tolerably well, and I feel sure I would have recognized the chap in spite of his disguise if I had ever met him."

"He's a mighty bold galoot, and it looks as if he was playing a lone hand in this game, but he's only wasting his time, of course; he can't beat Larry Pendragon, although he may succeed in giving him considerable trouble."

"The Silver King is too well heeled, and it would take a derrick to upset him."

The judge's mind was not working as clearly as usual, and he felt he must get out into the open air before he would be able to shape his thoughts so as to decide what he had better do in this matter.

"The brute has taken my revolver, too," McKinney muttered, as he arose and extinguished the light, and then made his way through the darkness into the entry.

"Curse his impudence! I paid fifteen dollars for it only last week."

And the judge swore to himself all the way down the stairs until he got into the street.

McKinney was one of those self-willed, obstinate men who could not bear to come out second best in any transaction, and not for years had he been so completely taken at a disadvantage as by the mysterious unknown.

"I must get even with the galoot," he muttered, as he started for the hotel where he boarded.

On his way up the street he encountered at intervals five of the townsmen, and to each man he put the question, "Had he seen any stranger on the street during the last ten minutes?"

But each and every man answered "no," so it seemed as if the road-agent had managed to get out of the town without attracting any attention.

At the hotel the judge got a bottle of whisky at the bar, and went straight up to his room.

Helping himself to a liberal supply of the fluid he sat down to cogitate, and before long he came to a determination.

"It will never do to go back on Larry Pendragon!" he exclaimed. "He could do me a heap of mischief if he chose. No, no, by all means I must keep faith with him."

"The order was extorted from me by force, and of course it won't amount to a row of pins when the true circumstances of the case become known."

"I'll just get on my horse to-morrow morning

early, and without saying a word to anybody I'll ride over to Blakeville.

"Then I can explain to Pendragon how the thing stands, and at the same time call upon Mike Creegan and explain to him that it won't do his side of the quarrel any good to call upon road-agents to browbeat judges. Mike is no fool, and when I represent the matter to him in the proper light, I've no doubt he will see that this road-agent business is a big mistake, and in the long run will do him more harm than good.

"I'll fix the thing up in a twinkling after I get on the ground!" was McKinney's last exclamation as he retired for the night.

Bright and early in the morning the judge was astir; partook of his breakfast, and then went to the corral and had his horse saddled.

"I don't feel very well this morning," he explained to the hostler, "and I thought a gallop might do me good."

This was to lull suspicion, for it was not his custom to do much riding, except when business demanded it, and he had an idea the road-agent perhaps might have a watch set upon him.

The judge was well-armed, having procured a pair of revolvers from the hotel-keeper, which the latter was desirous of selling, on the pretense of trying them.

And when McKinney rode out of Del Norte, instead of heading westward toward Blakeville he took the road southward toward the San Luis valley, but when he got well out of sight of the town he swung around to the left and pushed straight for the mining-camp.

And acting on the same idea which had influenced Pendragon when he set out on his nocturnal ride from Blakeville to Del Norte, the desire to avoid being waylaid by any evil-disposed person who might have reason to object to the journey, the judge took the old Indian trail over the mountains leading through the gloomy pass known as Hell's Canyon.

McKinney had never been over the road but once, and that was several years ago, so his remembrance of the trail was rather indistinct, and after he got fairly within the canyon he began to regret that he had not gone by the regular road through Wagon-wheel Gap.

But he was too far advanced now to think of retracing his footsteps, and so he kept on.

The canyon was as gloomy as ever, and although the sun was well up in the heavens, not a single one of its rays had strength enough to penetrate any distance into the dark ravine.

The dusky gloom of the twilight reigned supreme within the canyon, and the judge felt a feeling of awe creep over him as he advanced along the narrow way.

A presentiment of danger filled his soul, and even the horse he rode seemed subject to the depressing influences of the desolate ravine, for he slackened his pace into a walk and pricked his ears in a frightened sort of way as though he expected to see some frightful object start up suddenly from behind one of the massive boulders that were scattered along the rocky way.

McKinney, yielding to the apprehension that had so unexpectedly come upon him, drew one of the revolvers from its holster, and raising the hammer examined the workings of the cylinder.

The tool was in perfect order, and as the cylinder clicked around the judge felt a little easier in his mind.

"I'm a fool to be alarmed," he muttered, "but this infernal canyon is enough to give any one the blues. It's the ugliest hole I ever got into."

Then he let the hammer of the revolver down, but still retained the weapon in his hand as though he feared danger.

And there was danger for Judge Jake McKinney in Hell Canyon that morning.

Just ten steps more the horse took and then from behind one of the giant boulders rose the figure of the road-agent, no mystic light shining from his face this time though, for he wore the plain, black mask which so effectually concealed his features.

A cocked revolver was in his hand, and he was only some thirty feet distant.

Involuntarily the judge checked his steed and raised his revolver, forgetting that the hammer was down.

"The top of the morning to you, judge," quoth the Unknown, in the harsh, disagreeable voice which was evidently assumed to disguise his own natural tones.

"Go slow with that shooting-iron, McKinney," the road-agent continued, "or I shall be obliged to put a hole through you."

"What do you want with me?" cried the judge, angrily, perceiving that the Unknown had succeeded in getting a decided advantage.

"Merely a little friendly talk, that's all, just to give you a piece of advice."

"I reckon I ain't hungering much for any man's advice," replied McKinney, gruffly.

"Mebbe thar ain't any man in the world who ought to be as hungry as you this minute," the other retorted.

"Well, I don't know about that."

"I'll make it plain to you in a brace of stakes. You are on your way now to see Larry Pendragon. I persuaded you to give me an order last night appointing Mike Creegan receiver of

the Black Cloud property, and you are going to see the sheriff for the purpose of telling that the order is N. G., no good, and for him to go ahead and boost the Creegan party out of the mine if he can; ain't that the racket?"

The judge was astounded, the road-agent had guessed his game.

"No use to try and lie out of it, judge," the man continued, perceiving that McKinney was at a loss for words.

"That's the riddle you are going to try and make, and that is why I am waiting here to try and persuade you to go home and let things run as they are."

"You infernal scoundrel!" yelled McKinney, yielding to a sudden fit of rage and cocking his revolver.

His blood was up, and he had determined to give battle to the footpad.

But just as the judge succeeded in cocking the pistol the road-agent fired.

The report of the shot reëchoed through the canyon, and it was followed by a groan of agony from the lips of McKinney, and at the same moment the revolver dropped from his hand.

The road-agent had put a ball through the judge's wrist, completely disabling his hand.

McKinney was game though and with his left hand he plucked the other revolver from its holster.

But no sooner was the weapon produced than the road-agent fired again and with the same result as before.

The left wrist was pierced by the leaden messenger and down went the pistol, and the horse unrestrained this time by the hand of its master started, and McKinney, unable to manage him came heavily to the ground.

The road-agent came up and placed his revolver to the temple of the judge.

"What do you say? is it a die?" he cried.

"Mercy, mercy, for Heaven's sake don't kill me!" pleaded McKinney, groaning with pain and with all the fight thoroughly taken out of him.

"On which side are you in the Black Cloud fight?"

"Neither, I'll give you my word I'll have nothing more to do with it at all. I give up whipped. Spare me and I'll draw out of the game. I'm no hog and I am satisfied."

"Now you are talking; you've struck the right thing and let me post you a little on this racket," the road-agent remarked. "Larry Pendragon ain't so solid a man as you think. He's a big speculator and though he and his friends claim that he's worth six or eight million, yet whatever money he does possess is so invested in various enterprises, some good and a lot bad that it is mighty doubtful if he was called upon to put up a million in ready cash, he could raise the money."

"Besides that, Larry Pendragon has ten foes to one friend, and if the word gets out that he's going down-hill thar'll be a lot ready to jump on him."

"He's going to lose this Black Cloud mine fight, and all the money in the world wouldn't be any good to him."

"I'm fighting for Mike Creegan and old man Blake, and I reckon from what you have seen of me that you're pretty well satisfied I am a man of my word, and, I saw that the Silver King was going to come out ahead in this matter I would kill him with my own hand, jest as sure as you and I are hyer in this canyon this minute."

"I don't doubt you in the least and as far as I am concerned I'm out of the game."

"It would have been money in your pocket if you had come to that decision a few minutes ago, but you ain't badly hurt, though I reckon you won't sign any more orders for a while. It was my calculation to fix you in that way if you showed fight and I'm all prepared with bandages to make you comfortable until I kin send somebody to help you home."

Then the road-agent came up to McKinney and carefully bandaged his wrists, much to the astonishment of the judge who had never before met or heard of such a considerate footpad.

This job performed the road-agent caught the judge's horse and tethered him to one of the boulders near McKinney.

"So-long!" and then from behind a rock where he had him concealed the Unknown led out his horse, mounted him and rode off.

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE VISION.

ESTELLE DEL CARMEN sat alone in her luxuriously-furnished boudoir.

It was situated on the second story of the Del Carmen ranch, a front room facing to the west, and from it a door led into the sleeping apartment of the spoiled beauty.

The sundown hour had come, and Old Sol was rapidly descending behind the far western hills in a blaze of glory.

In a softly-cushioned easy-chair by one of the windows sat the mistress of the ranch.

There was a cloud upon her brow and hard, unnatural lines around her mouth.

Her eyes were fixed upon the beautiful sunset, but she noted not the glorious display that attended the exit of the god of day.

Estelle Spader's thoughts were far away.

Two weeks had elapsed since she had gone forth on what had proved to be a fruitless quest.

As the reader has probably surmised, the lovely widow of the old cattle-king had been the mysterious, closely-veiled woman who had called upon the Irish lawyer, seeking information of the lost young man, and at the same time making inquiry in regard to a person of whom O'Ballahoe had never heard—John Denver, a name which had struck the lawyer as being extremely peculiar and much more likely to be an assumed appellation than a real one.

Inspired by the lady's liberal offer, O'Ballahoe had spared no pains to succeed in his task, but not the slightest bit of success had crowned his efforts.

No such a man as John Denver had ever made his appearance in Blakeville as far as he could discover, and in regard to young Blake he was satisfied before he began his search that he would not be able to obtain any information about him.

As to the mysterious woman's idea that he was alive and in communication with the Black Cloud mine people, that was ridiculous on its face.

An idea which could only have been hatched up in the brain of a visionary woman.

The headstrong woman had told the lawyer not to spare expense, but O'Ballahoe, who was a sensible man for all his eccentricities, and a tolerable honest one in his way, had wisely asked himself what good could come of wasting money on such a fruitless quest.

Indeed, he had arrived at the conclusion that the woman was not exactly right in her mind—a monomaniac, in fact, upon this subject, and that John Denver had no existence outside of the busy brain of the woman.

O'Ballahoe, it must be remembered, had no knowledge whatever of his patron's reason for visiting the East.

Pendragon was of a secretive nature and always acted on the idea of not allowing the right hand to know what the left hand did.

And as the lawyer too had been pledged to secrecy by his unknown client, there was no chance for the Silver King being called upon to tell what he knew in the matter.

Not the slightest hope that any information could be obtained was the lawyer's opinion, and bluntly he expressed the opinion that there wasn't any use of wasting more money in the matter.

Estelle Del Carmen had returned to her mansion in a terrible state of mind.

She hardly tasted the luxurious dinner which was always served punctually at five.

The Del Carmen ranch boasted a first-class French cook, and neither its viands nor its wines could be surpassed west of the Mississippi, as all who had partaken of the hospitality of its fair mistress, and who were qualified to be judges, could testify.

This prairie-flower had developed wonderfully since the time when she became the bride of the old cattle-king.

If she had sold herself for gold, as all the envious neighbors asserted, most certainly she had made up her mind to get all she could out of the bargain.

The few weeks that had elapsed since her interview with the Silver King when she had announced that it was her belief that John Denver had not perished in the waters of the river when he escaped from the New York State prison, had wrought a wonderful difference in the appearance of the mistress of the richest ranch in the San Luis valley.

She had become haggard and care-worn, just as if years of trouble had passed over her head, instead of a few short weeks.

And the inmates of the house had noticed the alteration and wondered greatly at it, for it seemed strange to their lowly minds that one so highly favored by fortune, with not apparently a care in the world should allow herself to be troubled by anything.

But there wasn't one in the house that dared to even hint to the mistress in regard to the matter.

They knew the imperious nature of Mrs. Del Carmen too well.

She paid like an empress and exacted the most implicit obedience. Her orders must be obeyed without question, and woe to the unfortunate wight who attempted to ask the why and wherefore of any command issued by her supreme majesty.

She did not ask for either friendship or respect for she regarded all the inmates of the house as being so far below her in the social scale that there couldn't be anything in common between herself and them.

But it was not alone the weight of apprehension upon the mind of Estelle Del Carmen that had caused her to appear ten years older in as many weeks.

She was the willing slave to a vice which has ruined far stronger humans than this belle of the San Luis valley.

She was an opium-eater.

When the dark thoughts came over her and she trembled with apprehension as she thought

of the dire vengeance which her coolly planned schemes had provoked, in the subtle drug of the far East she found consolation and forgetfulness.

She had been a slave to the evil, and, in almost all cases, fatal habit for years, but she had been careful how she indulged until lately, but now, seeking to forget the terror which was constantly in her mind, she had sought the fabled waters of Lethe in the drug so dear to the almond-eyed sons of the far East.

Upon going to her own apartment she had summoned her maid and given strict orders that she must not be disturbed.

"The end will soon come," she muttered, after she had carefully locked the door and sunk into an easy-chair.

"He is not dead, I am sure of it; I can feel that he is hovering near me, weaving some terrible web to ensnare me to destruction.

"What fools are they who say that money is all-powerful in this world!

"It is not; man created money, and man is more powerful than gold. I have all the wealth that the heart of a woman can desire; I ought to be able with the aid of my money to crush a single foe as easily as the bird devours the worm.

"I am on the topmost round of the ladder, he crawls in the dust at its foot, and yet I cannot even think of him without trembling with terror."

By this time the bright sheen of the sunset had faded away and the dusky hues of night came steadily over the earth.

The lady closed the curtains so that the room was darkened, and then took the powerful dose of opium which she had prepared.

Sinking back in the chair, she gave herself up to the effects of the drug.

A dreamy languor stole over her; she became powerless and yet still conscious, for the dose was not strong enough to lull her senses to complete forgetfulness.

And then came a horrid sight.

Before her eyes appeared a face which shone in the darkness as a blazing star shines in the sky.

CHAPTER XXXIII. THE ACCUSATION.

THE drug had produced a strange effect upon its slave on this occasion.

Her nerves were all unstrung and she was in a condition of great mental excitement, so the drug, although she had taken an extra dose, did not act upon her in the usual manner.

And on this occasion her physical powers were so strong, that although the drug had deprived her limbs of their power of motion, and she reclined in the chair like one stupefied, yet was perfectly conscious of all that occurred, and even retained the power of speech, although her articulation was imperfect.

By this time the apartment was quite dark, and all that the woman could distinguish was the face which appeared in the open doorway which led to her sleeping chamber.

All she could distinguish was the face, there did not seem to be any body attached to it, and the features shone with a strange luster so that the countenance seemed to light up in the darkness.

She recognized it the moment it appeared, for it was the face of the man who she was sure would come to call her to an account the moment she had heard that the Sing Sing bird, John Denver, had managed to overleap his prison walls.

But after the first moment of surprise was over, she understood full well that the face was neither a creation of her troubled imagination, nor the features of a spirit fresh from the other world.

It was the man himself, come for the very cause she had feared, and like a guilty thing she trembled in every fiber.

The event which she had dreaded had at last occurred, and she was taken completely at a disadvantage, although she had made all possible preparation for just such an occurrence.

Under pretense that she was afraid the valuables contained in the ranch might excite the cupidity of reckless and evil-minded men, and thereby lead to a midnight raid upon the property, the house was guarded by the most complete system of burglar-alarm apparatus that money could procure; all the men-servants about the place went fully armed, and there was a regular patrol system established, so that after nightfall the house was guarded as carefully as a fortress.

But in spite of all these precautions the event which she dreaded had at last occurred.

The avenger had come.

And she was helpless to protect herself.

As helpless was she in the power of her enemy as though they were alone together in the middle of a great desert, and she fettered in every limb.

"Estelle Spader, do you know me—are you capable of speaking?" came from the lips of the strange-looking face upon which the woman was gazing like one fascinated.

"My name is not Estelle Spader," she replied, slowly, for it was with the utmost difficulty she

articulated at all. "My name is Estelle Del Carmen."

"To me you are Estelle Spader, and you will never be anything else," the intruder answered.

"I am nothing to you," she retorted angrily.

"Perhaps not, and yet I am much to you."

There was a world of menace in his tones, and lurid fires seemed to shoot from his eyes.

Despite her indomitable will and the angry passions raging within her soul, the woman was compelled to close her eyes, for she could not endure the storm of rage which flashed from his dark orbs.

"And you know it, too," he continued. "You have watched for me and at last I come."

"Of what avail are all your precautions now? From the Silver King, Larry Pendragon, down to the meanest herdsman on your estate, not one of them can be of the slightest assistance to you."

"You knew that in time I would come—come to call you to an account; you feared to meet the reckoning and so tried to rear such a barrier around you that mortal man might not scale it."

"But I am more than mortal man—I am a messenger of vengeance coming straight from either Heaven or Satan's Kingdom, as you please, and the precautions that might avail to prevent a common foe from reaching you cannot bar my progress."

"Are you prepared to die?"

A gasp came from the woman's lips, for a mortal terror filled her soul.

Gone now was all her courage; she felt that she was in the presence of her judge, and in her heart she groveled in the dust.

Her throat was parched, the breath came quick and hard.

"Mercy, mercy!" she gasped, her tongue hardly able to utter the words.

"Mercy!" And the accent of scorn with which he uttered the word fell like a pall on the affrighted heart of the woman.

"What mercy did you show, you tiger of a woman? Have you ever looked into your own heart? Have you ever looked back upon your own life, and with the eyes of a judge examined the foul record?"

"Mercy, mercy! I am not fit to die," she gasped, her mouth so parched, her brain so confused, her soul so filled with terror that she could scarcely speak.

"That is the common cry of the criminal when brought face to face with the executioner. But of what use is it to listen to such a plea?"

"Would you change in any way if time for repentance were allowed you?"

"Yes, yes; I swear it!" gasped the terror-stricken woman.

"And what atonement can you make for the crimes of which you have been guilty?"

"I am innocent—you wrong me."

"Do I? Listen and judge," retorted The Unknown, with bitter accent.

"Only a few years ago you were a young and guileless girl—you were innocent, for the temptation had not come."

"You were not rich; you did not then dream of riches; you prized love before gold, and when chance threw in your way a young man who became fascinated by your wondrous beauty, you in return fancied that you loved."

"The passion that existed between you twain was kept a solemn secret, for your father then had his eyes upon the old cattle-king, and the young man's sire also had another bride for him."

"Then came a separation, for the young lover had business that called him away, and you parted with him swearing eternal constancy, and six months after you married Bernardo Del Carmen."

"Gold had triumphed over love."

"A few short months and the lover who had been betrayed sought you in an Eastern city to demand an explanation, and you, still swearing that you loved him better than all the world, admitted him into your house by stealth at the midnight hour."

"An unlucky accident led to his discovery and he felt like a thief; he was pursued and was unfortunate enough to injure the faithful servant who pursued him."

"He was captured, and under a false name, as a midnight marauder, was condemned to the State Prison for life."

"He did not speak, for your honor was dearer to him than his life."

"He suffered that no stain might rest upon your fair name."

"And how did you repay this devotion?"

"Your husband died, and instead of using your wealth to obtain the release of the man who had blighted all his young life for your sake, you yielded to the demon ambition and sought to buy him to leave the country that you might wed a millionaire rival."

"The unaccountable disappearance of the lover drove his aged father crazy, and taking advantage of that misfortune, this same millionaire suitor who, with his gold sought to buy you, tried to wrest from the old man the valuable property he possessed."

"All, all is your work, and you have but a

single week to live—one little week to make your peace with Heaven, and repair as well as you are able the evil you have wrought in this world, then death and oblivion."

"No, no; I will not die—I defy you—I have gold—I will buy protection—I will—I will—"

And under the inspiration of intense excitement, she rose to her feet, her features convulsed, her eyes staring and her hands wildly clutched at the air.

She was frothing at the mouth, and then came a spurt of blood, a hollow groan, and she sunk at the feet of the avenger as if imploring mercy.

The extreme terror and rage acting upon her in her enfeebled state had brought about a fatal result.

She had burst a blood-vessel, and the beautiful belle of the San Luis valley had appealed her case to the last tribunal.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

PLANNING THE ATTACK.

DURING his sojourn in town Jack Mohave had become quite intimate with the little group whom the miners generally characterized as the Pepper crowd.

The reader will remember that he had made the acquaintance of these sharps soon after his arrival in Blakeville, and he had been intimate with them since the night when the landlord told the story of Nebraska Blake and the tale of the struggle for the mine.

The new-comer was a quiet fellow, who kept to himself pretty well, and though some of the sports of the town, imagining that he was well-heeled, in a financial way, had endeavored to get him to indulge in a little game, so that they would have an opportunity to relieve him of his wealth, yet none of them had been able to succeed.

He had no objections to a little game of poker, and, in fact, almost every night the Pepper crowd had a friendly encounter, in which he usually joined, yet it was more for amusement than profit, and could hardly be termed gambling, the stakes being so small.

It soon got round, of course, that the stranger was a speculator, looking for a chance to invest money, and every shark in the town with a worthless bit of mining property, went in to stick the "tenderfoot" with it.

But it did not take the camp long to discover that when they called him a tenderfoot, they made a big mistake.

He was a Westerner, out and out, and it was soon apparent that what he did not know about mines was not worth knowing.

The hotel was a busy place about this time, for Pendragon was using it for a headquarters, and the sheriff, being busily engaged in raising an army, there was a constant string of men passing in and out all the time.

The sheriff, for all his bluster and brag, realized that it would be no easy job to capture the Black Cloud Mine, and so was anxious to get together as big a force as possible.

On the night of which we write he had gone on to consult Pendragon, who had taken possession of the largest room in the house, a capacious apartment on the second floor.

The Irish lawyer was with the Silver King and both were enjoying an after-supper cigar when the official entered.

"Sit down and make yourself comfortable!" exclaimed the speculator. "Have a smoke?" he continued, producing his cigar case.

"Waal, I reckon I don't keer if I do," the sheriff replied.

"How goes everything?" Pendragon asked, after the official got his cigar under way.

"I can't complain, although I ain't picking up men as fast as I might."

"The blaggards are afeard!" the Irishman exclaimed. "More power to their elbows! I don't know as I would be after blaming them, for if all reports that I do be hearin' are true, it is a foine lot of fightin' min that same Mike Creegan has in the mine."

"Oh, I reckon that his men are no better than the average," the Silver King declared.

"I don't know 'bout that," the sheriff remarked with a dubious shake of the head.

"From what I have heered say I should reckon that he had a few extra good men in the place. That Charley Diamond now is a hummer, and it is my opinion that if we could get two or three men like him it would stiffen our backbone up amazingly."

"Well, get the men!" Pendragon exclaimed.

"I think the sheriff is right; wan extra good spalpeen—a regular divil of a brick, in a fight of this kind is worth three or four common men," the lawyer declared.

"Yes, that is my idea!" the sheriff remarked.

"If you know of any extra good man, or men, why go for them!" exclaimed the Silver King.

"Yes, but if I strike one of these king-pin fighters he is not willing to go in at the same rate," the sheriff complained.

"Ah, it is a question of money then?" the speculator observed.

"Yes, big fighters want big prices, you know."

"They may be after coming high, but in a ruction of this kind we must have them, begob!" the Irishman declared.

"Well, I suppose that it would be good policy for us to engage two or three extra good men—fellows that have big reputations as warriors, even if we have to pay them two or three times as much as we can get common men for," Pendragon observed, thoughtfully.

"Not the least taste of a doubt of it!" the lawyer exclaimed. "Wan or two good men will make the others come up to the rack and take their gruel!"

"You know Major Joe Pepper?" asked the sheriff.

The others nodded.

"Wa-al, I reckon that he is about as well-posted as any man in the county, and I have jest 'im a-gittin' pints from him," the sheriff said. "He knows what men are good, and what ain't."

"Oh, yis, if the spalpeen will only be honest wid ye," the Irishman remarked with a dubious shake of the head, which seemed to express a good deal of doubt about this.

"Ah, yes, but I reckon the major wouldn't try to play no roots on me!" the official asserted in a confident tone.

"Upon me worud! I wouldn't be willing to bet a d'ale of money on that!" the lawyer cried. "If that murdering blaggard of a major saw a good chance to crack a joke it is about tin to wan that he would do it, no matter whose toes he trod on."

"Oh, well, thar isn't no joke 'bout this hyer thing," the official declared. "I reckon the major wouldn't go far to play any racket onto me."

"Don't be afther betting much money on that, for it is my belafe you would be apt to lose!" O'Ballahoe declared.

"Say! I wish you would hold yer jaw for a while and g'in me a chance to explain things!" exclaimed the sheriff who didn't like the Irishman's comments.

"Go 'long wid ye—who's afther hindering ye?" cried the other.

"Paudeen is right about Major Pepper though," the speculator observed. "I do not believe you are safe in depending upon any information that the major may give. In the first place he is a practical joker, and if he could get the laugh on you by sending you on a fool's errand he would be migety apt to do it, and then too, I have an idea that the major is no friend of mine, not that I ever had any difficulty with the man in any way, but he don't like me on general principles, I suppose, and as he knows that you are here on my business I doubt if he would be apt to give you any information of value."

"Oh, that is all right!" declared the official, in a way that showed his dignity was offended. "I don't know what the major thinks of you, but I am right sart'in that he is a good friend of mine, and I reckon that when I want a little advice from him he will be apt to give it to me. Now, in this hyer case, I have picked up five good men through the major, and he has put me onto another one, a cuss that he says is jest old lightning on the fight, but he will be apt to come high. Maybe you have noticed the man. He is a good-looking, dark-faced fellow, and his name is Jack Mohave."

"Yes, I know the man," Pendragon observed. "I saw him a couple of days ago, and there was something about his face that seemed so familiar to me that I took the trouble to ask the landlord who he was."

"He looks like a hummer—one of those quiet chaps that are jest old chain lightning when they get a-going," the sheriff said.

"There is something about the man that I do not like," Pendragon observed. "I do not know what it is, exactly. It would puzzle me to give a reason. I suppose it is merely one of those dislikes which a man sometimes takes to another without any cause for it. Then, too, the fact that I feel certain I have seen the man somewhere, yet am not able to remember any of the circumstances, makes me think that there is something wrong about the fellow. I have a good memory for faces, and after I have once seen a man I seldom forget him."

"He is a stranger to me," the Irishman observed. "I will go bail that I niver saw the fore-front of his face before."

"I never met the man, but from what the major said I reckon he would be a good man for us to secure," the official observed.

"Well, engage him then. I do not doubt that he will do as well to stop a bullet as any man you can get," the Silver King observed.

"Yes, but I reckon we can't git him for the same money that the rest come for," the sheriff remarked.

"Oh, well, you can afford to do a little better if you think the man is worth it to strengthen our forces," Pendragon returned.

"I reckon he is; he ain't no common man; you kin see that with half an eye!" the official declared.

"Yes, he is a good head and shoulders above the rest of the fellows that you have enlisted, if I am any judge of human nature," the speculator said.

"You are willing to stand a good price for him then?" the sheriff inquired, rising as he spoke.

"Yes, anything in reason, but I don't calculate, you know, to pay him, or any other man, a fortune for taking a hand in this little affair, for it is not worth it."

"The game is not worth the candle, do ye mind!" exclaimed the lawyer, who being a well-educated man had all the old adages at his tongue's end.

"It is likely to be a tough fight, you know," the sheriff declared, with a wise shake of his head.

"Oh, I do not agree with you there," the speculator replied. "You must remember that we are getting together an overwhelming force—"

"'Bout fifty men all told!" interrupted the officer.

"Yes, and the mine is held by five men, not counting old man Blake, who is not able to take a hand in a fight, so you see the odds will be about ten to one, and though Creegan's party have the advantage of being protected by the stockade fence, yet that does not counterbalance the fearful odds against him," the Silver King remarked.

"Yes, the odds are big and we ought to win the fight without much trouble," the sheriff observed. "Of course Creegan is making a big talk about how he is willing to die right in his tracks rather than give up the mine."

"I do not doubt that he means every word he says, and, from what I know of the man, I believe that he would rather be killed than to yield the property, but the men who are working under him will not be inclined to make any such sacrifice when the time comes. They have not got the stake to fight for that Creegan has, and when they find that there is a small army to fight, and the chances are big that if the mine is not surrendered, not a man in the works will escape with his life, you can depend upon it they will not be fools enough to resist."

"Oh, it is our game to go with so big a gang as to scare the crowd right out of their boots," the sheriff declared as he departed.

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE OTHER SIDE.

THE sheriff descended to the saloon, and upon entering it encountered Major Pepper.

"Did you have any talk with Jack Mohave yet?" the major asked.

"No; I had to see Pendragon first, you know."

"How's that? You don't have to see him about every man you hire?"

"Oh, no; but from what you said about Jack Mohave, I got the idee that I couldn't git him for the same money that I am giving the rest."

"Yes, I told you that right at the beginning."

"I know you did, and the landlord said the same thing."

"He is no common three-dollar-a-day miner, you know," the major observed. "And if you want a man like him to help you out in a scrape of this kind, you must expect to ante up pretty steep."

At this point the sheriff happened to catch sight of the individual of whom they were speaking.

Jack Mohave sat at the extreme end of the saloon, by one of the tables, reading a newspaper.

"Thar's my meat now, and I will have a talk with him."

"Yes, you had better," the major advised. "Better secure him before the other party picks him up."

"Eh, what is that?" exclaimed the sheriff, amazed at the suggestion. "You don't mean to say that Creegan is raising a gang?"

"Well, no, not to my knowledge," the major replied. "Still, under the circumstances, I should not be surprised to see him make a move of that kind. That is really his game, you know. You are raising a gang to go in and clean him out, and what would be more natural than for him to imitate your action? If he could succeed in getting ten or fifteen good men to join those who are employed in the mine, the chances are big that he would be able to give you a mighty lively fight. Upon my word! I believe the skirmish would be worth going a hundred miles to see, and you can depend upon it that I will not miss the picnic," and then the major rubbed his hands briskly together, and beamed upon the official as though he was delighted at the prospect.

The sheriff was a rather dull-witted fellow, and this was an idea that had not occurred to him before, and now that it was suggested, he was not at all pleased with it.

"I reckon he would have a deal of trouble to get men," he remarked. "It has jest put me to my trumps to scare up an army, and Larry Pendragon is a man who pays mighty well, too."

"Yes, that is true; the Silver King has plenty of money, and he is noted for running it out just as carelessly as though it was so much sand when he gets into a difficulty of this sort."

"He is one of the kind that allers goes in to make a spoon or spile a horn!" the sheriff declared. "But I will have a talk with this hyer Jack Mohave."

"You will find him a mighty good man, I reckon, and if you can secure him he will be worth two or three common men," the old sport responded.

The sheriff went up to where Jack Mohave sat and helped himself to a chair.

"Stranger, I would like to have a few minutes' talk with you if you hain't got no objection," he said.

"None in the world; I am quite at your service," the young man responded laying aside his newspaper.

"I s'pose you know what my business is in this hyer camp?"

"Oh, yes; you have made too much stir since you have been here not to let everybody know what you are up to."

"I reckon I am all business, every time!" the official declared with a grin of satisfaction.

"You have been stirring around pretty lively."

"No use of a man living in this world if he don't keep a-going!"

"That is true."

"I s'pose you know all about this Black Cloud fight?"

"Yes, I think I do; I ought to, for I haven't heard much talk of anything else since I have been in the town," the young man observed with a laugh.

"It is a big thing now, I tell yer, and somebody is going to get hurt before the thing ends!"

"Certainly it looks that way now."

"You see, as sheriff of the county I have been called upon to act. The court has taken hold of the affair and gone in to straighten the tangle out. Creegan has possession of the property, but as the court has decided against him he has got to get out."

"He must be dull of comprehension, for he doesn't seem to understand it in that way at all," the other remarked, quietly.

"Oh, he understands all right, but he is a bull-headed son-of-a-gun and reckons he kin hold on, court or no court!"

"Yes, I see."

"And he is dead wrong, you bet, and if he wasn't so durned thick-headed he would see it, too!" the sheriff declared, emphatically.

"I suppose he is going on the old legal saying, you know, that possession is nine points of the law," Jack Mohave observed. "And if that is true, and these lawyers ought to know the law, he has nine points to Larry Pendragon's one, and mighty few men would hesitate to play a game with the chances nine to one in their favor."

"Oh, I don't take no stock in anything of that kind at all!" the official declared, unable to advance any argument calculated to weaken the force of the young man's remark.

"I figger this hyer thing down until it is jest as plain as the nose on a man's face! Larry Pendragon has got an order from Judge Jacob McKinney turning the property over to O'Ballahoe, who is appointed receiver, and he is to hold the property until the courts decide just exactly how the thing shall be settled."

"Yes, I understand all this, and backed by this order from Judge McKinney, O'Ballahoe has applied to you as sheriff of the county to be put in the possession of the property."

"You have got it right down to a hair."

"O'Ballahoe has got the order and Creegan has the mine," the young man observed in his quiet way. "Now, as I said before, it seems to me that Creegan has the best of it."

"Not at all! ain't he setting himself up ag'in' the law? Ain't I hyer raising an army to h'ist him out of the mine?"

"Yes, but it isn't a sure thing that you can do it."

The sheriff was astonished at this declaration. "Why, thar ain't a doubt 'bout it!" he cried.

"Maybe it looks that way to you, but it does not to a great many other people. Do you know how the sports are betting on the thing?"

The sheriff did not.

"They are giving odds on Creegan."

"Odds on Creegan! you don't mean it?" exclaimed the sheriff, amazed at this statement.

"That is a fact."

"Wa-al, I reckon the sports of this hyer town must be a leetle off their base then!" the official declared.

"What makes you think so?"

"'Cos the odds ought to be on Pendragon."

"I don't see how you can figure that out."

"I don't see how anybody kin figure in any other way. Thar's half a dozen men in the mine with Creegan, maybe."

"Yes, I believe that is about the extent of the force now holding the Black Cloud property."

"And the Silver King has given me orders to raise a posse of fifty men. When he came to me about this business, I told him right off that thar wasn't any use of my going to Creegan to ask him for to git out of the mine, 'cos he wouldn't pay any attention to the notification, and that I would have to raise a gang to h'ist him out."

"And such a proceeding costs money of course."

"You bet! Well, sir, he came up to the scratch like a man."

"Offered to pay all the expenses I presume."

"That was just the little game he was willing to play, and I tell you, stranger, he is jest the

kind of man to tie to, for when he wants anything done he never stops to count the dollars!" the sheriff declared in a lofty way.

"Well, I reckon that when the recording angel makes up his account he will not give him much credit for generosity in this case," Jack Mohave observed, dryly. "By investing a hundred thousand dollars he has secured a claim to a mine which is worth at the least calculation a million of dollars, so that if he should spend a hundred thousand ducats more in fighting, and manage to secure the mine he would be eight hundred thousand dollars to the good. No wonder that he can afford to be liberal. Most any man would be with such a prize in view."

The sheriff was surprised at this statement. He was a rather dull-headed fellow and had never taken the trouble to calculate how much the speculator would gain if he could succeed in getting possession of the Black Cloud property.

"In course, I s'pose he does stand a chance to make a big stake out of the thing," the official admitted, a little reluctantly, for he did not like the way in which the other had demonstrated that Larry Pendragon could well afford to be liberal in this matter.

"That is human nature," you know," he added. "But to come back to what I was saying. There will be fifty men at my back, and do you think that Mike Creegan, with his six galoots, will be able to hold that Black Cloud property ag'in' such a force as that? Why, my fifty will chew his six up so quick that they will never know what hurt 'em!"

"Sheriff, I am going to give you a point which the sports of Blakeville know, and you evidently do not; and because they are posted is why the sharps are giving odds on Mike Creegan."

This announcement made the sheriff open his eyes.

"What is the p'int?" he asked.

"When you get your fifty men together and start in to capture the Black Cloud property, you will find that there will be more than six men behind the stockade wall of the mine at Mike Creegan's back!"

The sheriff looked astonished.

"Is he raising a gang, too?" he asked.

"No, but public sentiment in this neighborhood is all in his favor, and when the time comes for you to advance to the attack, there will be a dozen or two of good men in this camp who will join Mike Creegan in that stockade ready to fight to the death in his behalf."

The official was more and more astonished, for he had not expected anything of this kind.

"But I say, I am an officer of the law!" he declared, "and in acting as I am in this matter, I am only carrying out the decree of the court, and if these sharps j'ine in with Mike Creegan, they will be a-setting themselves up ag'in' the law."

"Yes, the law as represented by Judge Jake McKinney!" Jack Mohave exclaimed, scornfully. "Now what do you suppose the men in this town care for McKinney? There are mighty few sports here who take any stock in the judge. There is no doubt that he is as big a rascal as can be found occupying a prominent position west of the Mississippi."

"That may all be; I ain't a-standing up for the judge, 'cos I know he has been mixed up in some scrapes which he ought to have kept out of, but what he says is good law until some other judge decides to the contrary, and these sports who get mixed up in this affair, when there isn't any call for them to take a hand in, may find that they have got themselves into a mess afore they git through," and the sheriff wagged his head in a solemn way as he made the announcement.

Josh Mohave laughed in derision.

"Oh, that is all bosh, sheriff, and you know it!" he declared. "When did you ever hear of anybody being prosecuted on account of taking part in one of these mining fights?"

"Wa-al, I don't s'pose that it does happen very often, but then it might; it is going clear ag'in' the law, you know."

"That is not apt to frighten men who live in a country like this," Jack Mohave observed.

"And now, sheriff," he continued, "I can tell you before you start into this thing that you are going to have the toughest fight you ever took a hand in. At the least calculation there will be eighteen or twenty men in the Black Cloud mine when you advance to the attack, and the extra men will be all volunteers too, sports who go into the fight because they think that Mike Creegan is in the right, and men of that kind who pitch in to fight for justice are apt to stick until they die in their tracks."

"Yas, I s'pose that is about so," the sheriff admitted.

"Now, when you come to count noses, and the peculiarity of the situation, you will find that your side hasn't got any advantage at all," Jack Mohave argued. "Mike Creegan and his twenty men behind the stockade wall are fully equal to your fifty men outside, for one man protected by the wall is a match for three who are obliged to fight without protection."

"Oh, I reckon the advantage ain't so big as

all that," the sheriff remarked, who did not relish the plain speaking of the other.

"Yes it is!" the young man declared. You just hunt up some man in the town who has been concerned in one of these affairs and see what he says about the matter. The men who make the attack have to advance across an open space exposed to the fire of the men within the stockade, who are completely protected, and the moment the attacking force get within five hundred feet of the mine the men behind the wall will open fire, and as they are all provided with the repeating rifles, and the most of them are extra good shots, they ought to be able to knock over two or three men apiece; that is setting it mighty low, mind you, for a good shot ought to be able to settle six or eight men in the time that it would take an average runner to cover five hundred feet, so you see that it is safe to say you will lose two-thirds of your force before any man of them will have a chance to fire a shot likely to damage the men behind the wall."

The official knew that Jack Mohave was figuring the matter out very fairly, but he was not disposed to admit it, so he remarked:

"Come now, I reckon that you ain't giving us a fair show for our money!"

"Oh, yes, I am!" Jack Mohave replied.

"Now, honestly, I think I am allowing you a better chance than you will get. I am reckoning that your men are as good as Mike Creegan's."

"Wa-al, ain't they?" demanded the sheriff in astonishment.

"Not by a jugful!" the other replied emphatically. "You must consider the situation. Now, man for man, you yourself, may be fully as good a fighter as Mike Creegan, but do you really think that when you come to the scratch in this affair that you will fight as desperately as Mike will?"

"I don't know why I shouldn't!" the official replied, doggedly.

"Why, man, it is not in human nature for you to do it! What interest have you got in this fight anyway? Nothing but a sense of duty, and a pride which urges you to do the best you can, but you are not fighting for your very existence as Mike Creegan is. The loss of this mine means utter ruin to him. Put yourself in his place and see if you would not go into this fight feeling a great deal different about it than you do now. And as for your men, do you mean to say that these fellows, whom you are picking up for four and five dollars a day, men who are only going into the thing because there is a prospect of making a dollar or two a day more than they can by working, do you honestly think that that is the kind of stuff to make good fighting men? Are they to be compared to the sports who volunteer to help Mike Creegan in this fight because they think he has right on his side?"

"Wa-al, when it comes to a fight, a man is a man, I reckon!" the sheriff exclaimed, in a stubborn way.

"You know better than that, sheriff," Jack Mohave exclaimed. "You have lived too long in this country not to know that a couple of good men can easily whip ten or twenty common ones, taking men as they run. Why, I have known three or four sports to take possession of a camp where there were fifty men, and hold it as long as it pleased them, and my honest opinion about this matter is that Mike Creegan and his twenty men could whip your posse in an open field, and not have to try very hard, either."

"I am not alone in this opinion, either, sheriff," the young man continued. "All the betting men in Blakeville are arguing the same way, and that is why they are willing to give odds on Cregan."

"The smartest sharps make mistakes sometimes," the official declared.

"Oh, yes, but I reckon that they have not this time; and I tell you what it is, sheriff, if you believe that the sports of Blakeville are not good judges, and you have the sand, and wealth enough to back your opinion, you can break the whole town, if you are right and the sharps are wrong."

"Wa-al, I don't do much betting, anyway," the official replied, in an irritated way, for he was conscious that he had got the worst of the discussion. "But I'm a heap sorry that you think the way you do about the matter, for I was in hopes to induce you to go in with me. I want some good men of your stamp, and am willing to pay a good price, too; good deal better than five a day, you know."

"Sheriff I would not join in this attack on the mine or go into help Larry Pendragon in any way if you were to pay me fifty dollars a day!" Jack Mohave exclaimed.

The official looked amazed.

"Is that so, now?" he asked.

"Just as sure as you are born!"

"Why, what have you got against the Silver King? I did not know that you knew him at all."

"No more do I, and, personally, I have not got anything against him, but I hate the class to which he belongs. He is a speculator, a schemer—a man who has made about every dol-

lar that he has in the world by getting the best of other men. His coat of arms, if he ever has one, ought to be a skull and cross-bones, the old pirate's signal, for that is the kind of man he is. He has risen upon other men's ruin, and do you think I would pull a trigger to aid such a man? Not much!" and scornful indeed was the tone in which the young man made the declaration. "You are an officer of the law," Jack Mohave "and you have not a free will in the matter. The law has directed you to put Larry Pendragon in possession of this property, and you have no choice but must obey, but with the sharps of this camp the case is different, and I reckon you will not find many of them willing to do anything for the Silver King in the fight."

"Wa-al, I dunno 'bout that," the sheriff replied shaking his head and endeavoring to look extremely wise. "I am gitting together a heap of men now, I tell yer."

"Yes, but if reports speaks true, you are not getting many men in this camp."

"I've got some!" the official declared.

"Yes, a few worthless bummers who will not amount to shucks when it comes to a fight; you are safe in betting all the money you can raise that they will run like rabbits the moment Creegan's men open fire and they hear the whistling bullets singing through the air."

"I ain't taken a man who hasn't been well recommended!" the sheriff declared.

"Warranted to stand up to the rack and fight, no matter how thickly the bullets are flying, eh?"

"Wa-al, the galoots are represented to be good men."

"When the fight commences you will speedily see that running is their best bolt!" the young man declared.

"I reckon I can't make no bargain with you then?" the sheriff remarked, in a disappointed way.

"I reckon you can't, but I will tell you what you can do."

"Go ahead."

"Since you feel so certain that you have got a sure thing on hand you can win a good big sum of money by betting on your side."

The official shook his head.

"I ain't no betting man, but if I was you kin bet yer life I would put up all the ducats I could get hold of that I will have Mike Cregan out of that mine; so long!" And the sheriff departed.

Although he affected to make light of the words of Jack Mohave, yet, in reality, they had made a deep impression upon him.

So much so that he felt that the Silver King ought to know of the opinion held by the sport.

But when he sought Larry Pendragon and reported to him the conversation, to his astonishment the speculator treated the matter with contempt.

"You must not pay any attention to any such stuff!" Pendragon declared. "If I stopped to kick every cur that barked after me I shouldn't have time to attend to anything else. I do not doubt that this camp is on Cregan's side, it is only natural that it should be that way, but I doubt if many of the miners will volunteer to fight for Cregan. They may talk that way, but talk is cheap and costs nothing. Talking and acting are two very different things."

"But it is certain that I ain't gitting many men hyer," the sheriff observed.

"It will be better to draw your men from another town. Suppose you go over to Del Norte and see if you can't raise your posse there."

The sheriff thought that was a good idea and that afternoon he departed for Del Norte.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

MISS MUGGLES'S SUITOR.

DOLLY MUGGLES was about the best-looking girl in Blakeville and, as a natural consequence, she was much sought after by the men of the town, both old and young, but none of them could boast of having been especially favored by the girl.

The old settlers—in a mining-camp the man who has tarried there for a year is looked upon as an old-timer—who knew of the intimacy which had existed between the girl and Nebraska Blake conjectured that the reason she did not encourage any of her admirers was because she had loved the missing man and cherished the hope that he would some day return.

One of Dolly's most ardent swains was a young man known as Bill Smithers, but more often called "Fatty," as he was short and stout.

Smithers was the manager of the Yellow Chief Mine, the largest concern in the town after the Black Cloud property.

He was a new-comer in the camp, having only been a resident for about a month, and had been sent to Colorado by the Eastern stockholders of the Yellow Chief to look after their interests.

Smithers, being a good-looking young fellow, although he was fat, had a fine opinion of himself; and, therefore, when he concluded to favor Miss Muggles with his attention, his astonishment was great when he discovered that she did not seem inclined to respond.

It did not take the miners long to discover that the "tenderfoot," as they termed the new-comer, was "mashed" on Dolly Muggles, and

when they saw that the girl did not seem disposed to smile upon his suit, it pleased them exceedingly, and many were the jokes they cracked at his expense.

Buck Tyler was the engineer at the Yellow Chief, and he and young Smithers being quite friendly, the latter confided to him his surprise that Miss Muggles did not seem to care for his attentions. Then Tyler told him the story of young Blake's disappearance, and how it was supposed there had been a love affair between the young man and Dolly Muggles.

"Well, as the man is dead and gone, I don't see what difference it should make to her," Smithers observed.

"Well, I s'pose she is kinder hoping ag'in' hope, you know," Buck Tyler replied. "Gals are queer cattle, you know, and, mebbe, she has an idee that he will come back some time."

"Yes, but as there isn't much doubt that the man is dead, such a thing is not likely to happen."

"That is true enough, but you can't allers git gals to look at sich matters the way they ought to," the veteran replied. "Dolly is a right nice gal. I reckoned once on a time that I shouldn't mind going with her in double harness, but when I come to shine up to her she wouldn't have it for a cent. I entered fair and square for the race and was distanced in the first quarter."

"Of course, I have not said anything outright to the girl," Smithers observed, thoughtfully. "But I think I will have to talk with her, so as to find out just what she thinks."

"Well, I would if I were you; then you will know just what chance you stand in the race," Buck Tyler remarked, apparently honest in offering the advice, but in reality chuckling in his sleeve at the idea, for he felt perfectly sure that Dolly would speedily send Smithers away.

That evening, Smithers went to the hotel and told the landlord, Kansas Jim, that he would like to speak to Miss Muggles in the parlor, as the scantily-furnished reception-room to the left of the saloon was called.

Kansas Jim looked at the young man for a moment, noticed that he had taken unusual care to make himself look as well as possible, and an idea as to why he wanted to see the girl, came into his mind.

A grin appeared on the landlord's face, and, assuming a mysterious air, he said:

"Want to see Dolly on important business, hey?"

"Say! you are getting too inquisitive!" Smithers exclaimed.

"Oh, you mustn't mind me. I have been thar, myself, you know. I kinder reckoned I would like to hitch teams with the gal awhile arter she came to work hyer, but she wouldn't have it, nobow! and, 'tween you and me, and the bedpost, pard, you are jest wasting your time and breath if you reckon to talk sweet to Dolly Muggles."

"Oh, come now, Jim, you are putting it a little too strong!" the young man declared. "Because she would not listen to you is no reason why she should not listen to me."

"Don't you fool yourself 'bout that," the landlord exclaimed, emphatically. "Of course, I know jest how you are reckoning. You think that you are a darned sight better-looking than I am, and, mebbe, kin put on more style, p'haps, you kin pony up more ducats, though I reckon I am tolerably well fixed. Then you have got cheek enuff to say to yourself: 'I stand a heap sight bigger show than Kansas Jim did.' Mebbe you do, and then ag'in mebbe you don't. I'll tell you what I am game to do, and that is to bet you a trifle that all you will git out of Dolly Muggles will be 'no.'"

"Well, I don't know as I care to bet about the thing, although I am willing to admit that I think I do stand a better chance than you do, for in the first place you are old enough to be the girl's father."

"Ah, that don't make no difference. If I had been the youngest and handsomest cuss in the world I reckon I would have got the same answer!" the landlord declared. "These gals are queer cases, and this hyer Dolly Muggles is the queerest of the lot. Now you have been running right arter the gal ever since you struck the town."

"Oh, I don't know as it is quite as bad as that," Smithers observed.

"You kin bet it is!" Kansas Jim exclaimed. "I had my eyes right on you the furst night you were hyer to supper, and I see'd then that you were stuck on the gal, and you let her see it, too, and thar is whar you made a big mistake, for she is one of the kind of gals that go by contraries. If a feller is arter her it sets her ag'in' him, but if he keeps right on minding of his own business, and don't pay no attention, jest as if thar w.s'n't no sich gal in the world as Dolly Muggles, then she will be inclined to think that he is some pumpkins."

"What put this idea in your head?" Smithers asked, surprised at the declaration.

"Don't you give it away if I tell you?"

"Of course not!"

"I allers reckon to keep my eyes open, you know, 'cos that is a part of my business as a landlord," Kansas Jim explained.

"Yes, that is natural."

"You know this dark-faced galoot who calls himself Jack Mohave?"

Smithers nodded.

"He is a quiet sort of a chap, you know, keeps to himself and minds his own business mighty well, and since he has been in the house has paid no more attention to Dolly than if she had been a nigger or a John, and you would hardly believe it, pard, when I say that I have catched the gal watching on him a good half-dozen times, when she reckoned that neither he nor anybody else was noticing what she did."

Smithers's brows contracted. He was both surprised and annoyed by this intelligence.

"You don't really think the girl has fallen in love with this stranger that no one knows anything about?" he asked.

"Well, now, sport, I must say that it looks like it!" the landlord declared, with a knowing shake of the head.

"It is a mighty strange thing, and if it is so, I think I will have to have a little talk with the man."

"Tain't his fault; he ain't been making up to the gal, that I will take my oath on!" the landlord replied.

"Yes, but, if your suspicion is correct, if the man hadn't come to the camp there might have been a chance for somebody else."

"That's so—I never calculated on that."

"I will have a talk with the girl and then I will be able to tell something about the matter."

"Well, you h'ist inter the parlor and I will send her in."

The young man proceeded to the apartment and Kansas Jim delivered the message to Miss Muggles.

She evidently did not desire to see Smithers, but after thinking the matter over for a moment concluded to go.

The landlord indulged in a prodigious chuckle when she entered the parlor.

"I reckon it will not take her long to tell Fatty that his cake is all dough!" he declared.

When the girl entered the apartment Smithers rose and made an elaborate bow, then he brought a chair and invited her to be seated.

She complied, although evidently with reluctance.

Smithers was a "cheeky" fellow, to use the slang word, and lost no time in coming to the point.

"My dear Miss Muggles, your beauty and many charms of character have made a deep impression upon me and I am anxious to obtain your permission to pay my addresses to you."

"I am sorry, Mr. Smithers, that I am unable to grant your request," the girl replied, immediately, her face flushing up a little, but her manner perfectly composed.

This abrupt and decided refusal both annoyed and astonished the young man.

He had not expected he would receive a favorable reply, but he had not looked for such a quick declination.

"Hain't you better take a little time to think the matter over?" he asked, in an insinuating way, trying his best to conceal the disappointment which he felt.

"Oh, no, I do not require to deliberate," she replied. "I can give you your answer now as well as if I waited for a month."

"I presume then the report which I have heard in regard to you is true," Smithers said, plainly showing now by his manner how much he was disgusted by the prompt refusal.

The girl looked surprised.

"I do not know what report you mean," she observed.

"Why, that you have fallen in love with this dark-faced stranger who calls himself Jack Mohave!" the young man exclaimed, bluntly.

Dolly jumped to her feet as suddenly as though she had received an electric shock, her face flushed crimson.

"You have no right to say such a thing as that about me!" she cried. "It is dreadful and don't you ever dare to speak to me again!" and then she swept out of the room with the air of a tragedy queen.

Smithers gazed after her for a moment, dumfounded by this unexpected outbreak.

"Well, well, I reckon I have made a bad break and put my foot in it in the worst kind of way," he muttered as soon as he recovered from his amazement.

"I have settled the thing for good and all as far as any love affair between myself and Miss Dolly Muggles is concerned."

"It is evidently true that she has fallen in love with this Jack Mohave, or else she would not have got so angry about the matter."

At this point the door opened and the grinning face of Kansas Jim appeared.

"I have jest been on the watch to see how this leetle thing would pan out," he announced.

"And I reckon from the short time that the gal was in the room, and the way she bounced out of it, that you and she didn't git on very well together."

"It is a fact that we agreed to disagree mighty quick," Smithers admitted with a long face.

"And I reckon from the way the girl looked,

that you must have said something which r'iled her?" the shrewd old landlord observed.

"Yes, she got angry; she made no bones about telling me that she did not want my attentions and I lost my temper and asked her right out if it was true that she had fallen in love with this Jack Mohave."

The landlord gave utterance to a low whistle, expressive of great astonishment.

"Well, I swow! 'pears to me that it was kinder stupid in you for to do a thing of that kind. No wonder the gal's face was red."

"I was angry, of course, or else I should not have done it," Smithers remarked. "But you were right in your surmise. There isn't much doubt that she is struck after this stranger; if she was not, she wouldn't have got so angry when I suggested it."

"You have cooked your goose, for sure!" Kansas Jim exclaimed.

"Oh, yes, I don't stand any chance now as far as the girl is concerned, and the only way I can get satisfaction is to go and pick a quarrel with the man."

The landlord looked amazed.

"Say! you don't reckon to try any game of that sort, do you?"

"That is what I am thinking about," Smithers replied. "This girl's refusal has cut me right clean to the bone, and I am anxious to show her that I am a far better man than this Jack Mohave."

"Yas, but are you?" asked Kansas Jim, shrewdly, and with a knowing shake of the head, just as if he had considerable doubt in regard to the matter.

"You bet I am!" and Smithers threw out his chest proudly. "In the East I belonged to an athletic club, and when it came to boxing I could hold my own with any man in the organization."

"Well, you look as if you could do some fighting," the landlord remarked, surveying the stocky figure of the other. "But I reckon that this Jack Mohave is a pretty good man, too, and mebbe you will make a mistake if you tackle him."

"Oh, no, I can handle him easily enough," Smithers declared, in the most confident manner.

"I hope you kin; I don't know, of course, 'cos I never see'd either one of you in a skirmish, but I kin tell you that thar is a mighty sight of difference between standing up for a friendly boxing-match ag'in' a chap you know, with pudding-bags on your fists, and facing a stranger who is going in to do his best to hammer you."

"Oh, I will make a holy show out of this fellow!" Smithers declared, with the utmost confidence.

"I dunno, he looks like a tough chap," Kansas Jim remarked, evidently doubtful.

"And if I warm him well, maybe the girl will come to the conclusion that she made a mistake when she picked him out."

"Then you have made up your mind to go into this thing?" the landlord asked.

"Oh, yes, I will pick a quarrel with him on the first opportunity."

"Well, you will not have long to wait, or far to go, for the critter is in the saloon now."

"Come on then, and see me astonish him!" Smithers exclaimed.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE QUARREL.

SMITHERS started for the saloon and the landlord followed.

"Mebbe, I have made some mistake about this matter," Kansas Jim muttered to himself, "but it is my idea that a smart, fat chap 'bout your size stands as much chance to be astonished as anybody."

When the two entered the saloon they found Jack Mohave in conversation with Buck Tyler and Major Pepper, seated at a table near the bar.

There were about a dozen people in the saloon; in a camp like Blakeville the hotel saloon is the general lounging place after work hours.

The entrance of Smithers and the landlord did not attract any particular attention, and the young man marched up to the bar.

"Johnny, give me a light-colored drink!" Smithers exclaimed to the bartender. "I don't like either dark-colored drinks or dark-colored men!" and as he spoke he turned half around and cast a glance full of hostile meaning at Jack Mohave.

All within the saloon stared with astonishment as the words fell upon their ears, with the exception of the landlord, who was, of course, prepared for just such a thing.

Jack Mohave elevated his eyebrows and looked at his companions as much as to ask whether the speech was aimed at him or not, but they were too busily engaged staring at Smithers, trying to discover what had got into the man, to notice Jack Mohave's questioning look.

Just a moment the dark-faced stranger hesitated, and then he said:

"Did you intend that remark for me?"

"If the shoe fits you can wear it if you like!" Smithers replied in an insolent way.

It was the first impression of about everybody in the room when Smithers spoke that the Yellow Chief man had been drinking, for it did not seem possible that anybody would thus wantonly provoke a quarrel unless under the influence of liquor, but when they came to take a good look at him, and he spoke the second time they saw that he was not flushed with liquor.

"Well, I am much obliged to you for the permission," Jack Mohave remarked, quietly. "As far as the shoe-fitting goes there isn't much doubt that it *does* fit, for I think I am the only dark-faced man in the saloon, but, stranger, will you have the kindness to explain why you want to pick a quarrel with me? I am not aware that I have ever trod on your toes or interfered with you in any way."

"I don't see that it is necessary for me to explain," Smithers replied. "If you have the proper amount of sand you ought to be willing to come forward and show what kind of stuff you are made of when you are called upon so to do."

"Oh, you will find that I will come up to the scratch promptly enough if you insist upon it," Jack Mohave remarked. "The only thing is, that when I go into a fight I always like to know what I am fighting about."

"About nothing at all!" exclaimed the other, promptly and in a lofty way.

"Well, as a rule, men don't fight for nothing at all," Jack Mohave remarked. "You have some reason, of course, for wanting to pick a quarrel with me, and I do not see why you should make a mystery of the matter."

"Only because it suits me, that's all!" Smithers exclaimed in a very insolent way.

"Then you object to going into particulars?" "Yes, I do! What difference does it make to you? Reckon that as you are a stranger I am anxious to find out just how good a man you are, and let it go at that."

"All right, I am agreeable!" and Jack Mohave rose to his feet, displaying the fine proportions of his manly figure, a decided contrast to the fat and stocky Smithers.

"Since you want to try my quality I will endeavor to oblige you to the best of my ability. No man ever yet found me backward in coming up to the captain's office when called upon to settle."

"That is the kind of talk I like to hear!" Smithers declared. "You may think that you are a great chief, but I reckon I will show this camp of Blakeville before I get through that there are plenty of men in the town far better than you are."

"Well, I have not made any boasts since I have sojourned in this camp in regard to what I could do, but when the trial comes I will do my best to keep my end up," Jack Mohave observed.

"That is the way to talk!" Smithers declared. "A man who hasn't got sand enough to stand up like a man is no good in a country like this."

"Well, as a rule, I don't believe that a man is obliged to fight every bully who takes it into his head that he is a great chief, and goes about picking quarrels, just for the fun of the thing, but I take it that you are not a man of that description, and although you are not willing to explain why you desire to fight with me, yet I feel certain that in some way I have interfered with you. I don't understand how it can be, but I am prepared to take the consequences, all the same. And now how will you have it, knives, pistols or fists?"

"Fists will suit me," Smithers replied. "I am not anxious to take your life. All I want is to give you a good hiding."

"Well, if you are able to do it, you are quite welcome to perform the feat as far as I am concerned," Jack Mohave replied, dryly.

"If you will take the trouble to come out into the street I will soon satisfy you in regard to that point!" the Yellow Chief man declared, in a boastful way.

"I am agreeable," Jack Mohave replied. "There's a full moon, so we will have plenty of light," Smithers announced.

"Go ahead! I'm your man!"

Smithers swallowed the liquor which he had ordered and then marched out into the street. Jack Mohave followed, and after him came all the rest. The landlord hastened after Jack Mohave and whispered in his ear as he passed out of the saloon:

"It is all along of Dolly Muggles," Kansas Jim said, hurriedly. "The galoot wanted to make up to the gal, and she wouldn't have it, and he got the idea into his noddle that she liked you and that was the reason she wouldn't have anything to do with him."

"And that accounts for the milk in the coconut, eh?" Jack Mohave responded, in the same cautious tone.

"Sure as ye'r born!"

As it was early in the evening there were plenty of people in the street and when the "crowd" came from the hotel, immediately attention was attracted, the miners approaching from all quarters eager to see what was going on.

The landlord suggested that there was a quiet spot back of the corral, shielded from observa-

tion, where the encounter could take place, and the party proceeded thither.

"Now, I suppose we will have this affair conducted according to regular ring rules," Smithers observed, after the ground was reached.

"Any way you like," Jack Mohave responded.

"We want some man as referee," the Yellow Chief manager suggested.

"I reckon Buck Tyler kin fill the bill as he is an old sport," the landlord suggested.

"Mr. Tyler will suit me," Jack Mohave announced.

"And me, also!" Smithers declared.

"Well, gents, I am a leetle rusty 'bout this kind of business, but if you want me to try it on, I reckon I will give you a squar' deal, every time; a fair field, no favor, and may the best hoss—man, I mean, win!" the veteran sport remarked.

"Will the Marquis of Queensbury rules suit you?" Smithers said to his opponent.

"Yes, I have no objection to them," Jack Mohave replied.

"Lemme see," observed Buck Tyler, reflectively. "As near as I kin remember, that is three minute rounds and a minute between."

"I believe that is about right," Smithers remarked. "It is even enough, anyway, and it suits me all right."

"I'm agreeable," the other principal observed.

"Well, then, gents, I will do the best I kin for yel!" Buck Tyler announced. "So go ahead as soon as you like. I s'pose you wants seconds both on you?"

"I will take care of Jack!" Major Pepper exclaimed. "I have seen some good men box in my time, and I reckon I know the points as well as the next man."

"I reckon I will have to look arter Mr. Smithers if thar ain't somebody hankering real hard for the job," Kansas Jim announced.

And as no one appeared to be affected in this way it was settled that the landlord should second the Yellow Chief man.

"But, I say, we want a timekeeper," Buck Tyler remarked.

Some one in the crowd suggested Solomon Oppenheim, the little Jew storekeeper who was believed to have the best watch in the camp.

Oppenheim, who had a good deal of sporting blood in his veins, willingly agreed to serve.

"Everything is O. K. then," Buck Tyler announced. "And as soon as you gents are ready you kin pitch in."

It did not take the couple long to prepare for the encounter.

They removed their coats, laid aside their weapons, tightened the belts around their waists and rolled up their sleeves.

"Are you ready?" Buck Tyler asked, when he perceived that the two appeared to have completed their preparations.

"All ready," Smithers replied.

"So am I," responded Jack Mohave.

"Come up to the scratch, shake hands and go at it; time!" Buck Tyler exclaimed.

The antagonists approached each other and clasped hands, and then as the grip was loosened the Yellow Chief man tried a bit of "funny business;" with his left hand he gave Jack Mohave a sounding slap on the cheek with the palm of it, but the grin which appeared on his face as he performed this feat speedily gave way to a look of surprise, for, with wonderful quickness, Jack Mohave let drive with his right, and his iron-like fist landed on the jaw of Smithers with a force which seemed to loosen every tooth in his head.

The Yellow Chief man reeled back from the force of the blow and Jack Mohave, quick to improve the advantage, followed him up, and gave Smithers an awful lick with his left fist in the chest, just over the heart, which made the Yellow Chief man grunt with pain; then, without allowing his opponent time to recover, Jack Mohave banged him again and again, and the fourth blow sent Smithers over on his back.

A yell went up from the crowd when they saw the Yellow Chief manager go down. It had become known to the majority of the crowd that Smithers was the aggressor, and had wantonly bantered Jack Mohave into the fight, and therefore it pleased them to see the Eastern man so roughly handled.

So far, Smithers had not been able to strike a blow, all his endeavors being to ward off the strokes which his antagonist was delivering with such rapidity.

The Yellow Chief was in no condition for such a contest as this, for he was as fat as a hog, and when he got upon his feet, which was not for fully half a minute, so exhausted was he by his efforts, and from the effects of the punishment which he had received, he was almost helpless.

"A minute more of der round!" exclaimed the little Jew.

"Go at it and wind up!" Buck Tyler cried.

Smithers, puffing like a porpoise, put his arms up on guard, and Jack Mohave approached him, but the moment he got within reach the Yellow Chief man broke away and retreated, evidently afraid to come to close quarters.

Jack Mohave put down his arms and laughed.

"Oh, come; stand up like a man!" he exclaimed. "This is a fight and not a foot-race. You are the man who was anxious for the thing,

and now that you have got it you ought to face the music."

"Time's up!" announced Oppenheim.

The opponents retreated to their corners.

"Say! you are winded!" Kansas Jim exclaimed to Smithers.

"Oh, I'm done for!" he responded, hardly able to speak. "I'm all out of condition, and you can throw up the sponge for me. I am no match for this man, and I am not fool enough to stand up and be hammered!"

The crowd were not astonished at the declaration, for they knew it was the truth. Smithers departed, completely disgusted, while the rest returned to the hotel where Jack Mohave was the hero of the hour.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE MISSING CHECK.

PENDRAGON and O'Ballahoe were closeted in the latter's office in Blakeville, busy in consultation.

The time had been set for capturing the Black Cloud property by force of arms, and the pair, like a couple of conspirators, were hard at work arranging the details of the affair.

This was some three days after the one on which Judge Jake McKinney had been handled so roughly by the mysterious road-agent, and the two were discussing the outrage just at the time we introduce them to the reader.

"Be the powers!" exclaimed the Irish lawyer, "it's a foine thing that we were afther getting the order from the judge before this little misfortune happened to him, or else we wouldn't be able to fix it, for they do be afther telling me that he will not be able to hold a pin for a month or two."

"Yes, it's rather rough on the judge, but it's fortunate for us," the millionaire remarked. "McKinney is a slippery customer, and although he granted us the order, it wouldn't be out of keeping with what he has done in the past for him to turn right around and give another order, upsetting the first, to the opposite party, provided they put up enough cash to induce him to run the risk of making an enemy of me."

"True for yeess!" the Irishman exclaimed.

"And speaking of money, do you know this affair has about cleaned me out of ready cash?" the Silver King asked.

"Is that so?"

"Indeed it is. It hasn't been anything but a hundred dollars here and a hundred dollars there for the last week. In fact, ever since this raid was organized. The sheriff is continually striking me for funds, and his army have an idea, too, that it will be tough work to rout Creegan, for every soul of them wants five dollars a day and rations, and they can't be got for less either."

"Faix! I wouldn't be afther being willing to risk a shot from Mike Creegan's rifle for a thousand times five dollars," the lawyer observed.

"The case is different with these blackguards, of course. But the sheriff has run me so short of money to pay his vagabonds that I've been obliged to telegraph to Denver to send me down five thousand dollars by special messenger. He ought to be here by this time, too."

Hardly had the words left Pendragon's lips when the door opened and the special messenger appeared.

"Hallo, John! talk of the fiend and he appears!" exclaimed Pendragon.

The special messenger was a young man, a lawyer by profession, named Blair, who attended to the millionaire's Denver business.

The young man laughed and helped himself to a chair, and sat down after shaking hands with the pair.

"You've come just in the nick of time, too, for my funds are beginning to run low," Pendragon continued.

A serious look came over the special messenger's face, and he shook his head gravely.

"I haven't been able to bring much money," he remarked. "The fact is, Mr. Pendragon, your account with the bank is a little overdrawn, and they were not willing to advance any more money."

"Nonsense!" exclaimed the millionaire, "there is some mistake about the matter. My account isn't anywhere near being overdrawn. I've got, at the least, a hundred thousand dollars in the bank."

"Here's the statement and checks," replied Blair, and he produced the papers from his pocketbook. "Your last check of five thousand cleared your balance out and put you in the bank's debt to the tune of forty-five hundred dollars."

"The bank honored that check, but they are not willing to get in any deeper. The check before that for a hundred thousand is what cleaned you out."

"A check for a hundred thousand!" fairly yelled Pendragon, and he grabbed the bit of paper out of Blair's hand.

It was the long-lost check sure enough payable to the order of Thomas Blake, indorsed by him, and collected through the First National Bank of Pueblo, and of course it was not apparent who had got the money, but both the

millionaire and the Irish lawyer felt satisfied they knew where the funds had gone.

A hundred thousand dollars would amply supply the money-chest of the enemy.

This was a knock-down blow, for Pendragon had calculated upon this money for the carrying on of the war, and he had felt as sure that the check would never be presented as though he had it in his own possession.

"I brought a thousand along with me, and it was all I could raise," Blair explained.

"All right, that will do for the present, but we must push things immediately," was the Silver King's reply.

Change the scene of our tale now with the same rapidity that the painted canvas shifts upon the mimic stage.

Six hours later, and the place the headquarters cabin on the Black Cloud property.

Within the room sat Mike Creegan, Charley Diamond, Major Joe Pepper, and old man Blake.

The major had just arrived with the intelligence that the sheriff had arrived in Blakeville with at least fifty well-armed men at his heels and it was reported all over town that he intended to seize the Black Cloud property, even if he had to wade in blood.

"Well, since there is to be a fight, the sooner it comes the better," Creegan observed, grimly. "As long as this state of thing keeps on, it is almost impossible to do any work, and I am beginning to see the end of my money. I owe the hands a week's wages to-day, but I shall have to put them off, I'm afraid."

"No, no," suddenly interrupted old man Blake, who was leaning back in his chair as usual, pulling away at his pipe, apparently half-asleep, "we mustn't do that, Mike; always pay the hands on time; that is the only way to make things run smoothly."

"Tom, we must have money before we can pay," Creegan replied, humoring the conceit of the old man.

"No trouble about the money; if you are short, I have plenty. How much do you want?"

And to the amazement of the rest, the old man pulled out a huge wad of bills.

"That check, you know, Mike, that you used to bother me about," old Blake explained. "I put it away in one of Nebraska's books and forgot all about it; but he came and had a talk with me the other night, when you were all asleep, and somehow I remembered everything then. He took the check, said he would collect the money, and I guess he did, for he came again last night, gave me a thousand dollars, and told me to give it to you, but I forgot it until now. My head is mighty uncertain nowadays."

"In God's name, who came to you?" Creegan cried, excitedly.

"Why, my son, Nebraska—Nebraska Blake—I told you he was alive all the time, and so he is."

Before an explanation could be had, Buck Tyler came rushing into the cabin with the information that the sheriff and his force were advancing on the property.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

CHECK TO THE KING.

THE news brought by Buck Tyler proved to be only too true; the sheriff was indeed advancing, and at his back were fully fifty armed men.

With the sheriff came Lawrence Pendragon and the Irish lawyer, O'Ballahoe, and at a safe distance in the rear about all the citizens of the camp.

When the sheriff and his party arrived within five hundred yards of the works they came to a halt, a result caused by a sudden appearance behind the wall that surrounded the Black Cloud, of Mike Creegan, Charley Diamond, and the workmen attached to the property, reinforced by Major Joe Pepper, Buck Tyler, and the young stranger, Jack Mohave, all armed with rifles, which they handled in an ominous manner.

Clearly the garrison which held the position were not dismayed at the approach of the sheriff and his army, and were much more inclined to show fight than to tamely surrender without striking a blow."

"Bedad! look at them show their teeth!" O'Ballahoe exclaimed.

"If they show their teeth, we'll have to pull them!" Pendragon observed, grimly.

"Hain't you better have a little talk with them and see if you can't make them listen to reason?" asked Blair, who, not being used to such scenes, was beginning to get a little nervous.

"Oh, yis; I've us alone for that," replied the Irishman, with a cunning wink. "When we go ahead it will be with the law on our side. If there's any min kilt in this skirmish, it's the other party that must be answering to the charge of murder, and not us, do ye mind?"

"You kin bet all your stamps on that!" cried the sheriff with a knowing air. "We are going to act right inside the law every time, and these cusses over yonder are the galoots who are going to git into trouble."

"We'll clean 'em out furst and then hang

those who ain't killed in the fight for murder arterwards."

"That's the peppergram, do ye mind!" exclaimed O'Ballahoe facetiously.

"Now, boys, I'll go and speechify to these galoots over yonder," said the sheriff, addressing his "army." "And jest you stay here and lay low until I come back. If they know when they are well off they'll dust out of thar right lively when they see that I mean business, and if they don't, why, we'll wade into them in a way that they won't like."

There was a feeble cheer from the army, for in reality, now that they were brought face to face with the task for which they had been hired, they did not relish the prospect.

The sheriff took out his handkerchief—he had taken pains to provide himself with a clean white one on purpose to serve for a flag of truce, and advanced toward the fortification, while all the bystanders watched the proceeding with breathless interest.

When he arrived within fifty feet of the wall, he halted.

"Mister Creegan, I want to have a leetle talk with you, if it is agreeable," he said, with a great deal of official pomposity.

"Certainly, it is quite agreeable," Creegan replied.

"I s'pose you know who I am?"

"Yes, I think I do."

"I'm the sheriff of this hyer county."

"Correct, I believe."

"I've got a leetle court order which I should like to call your attention to."

"I'm all attention."

"This order is for Mister Paudeen O'Ballahoe to take possession of this property as receiver until the courts finally decide who is entitled to it."

"What do you suppose I care for such an order as that?" asked Creegan, in contempt.

"You won't attempt to disobey it?"

"Most certainly I will."

"Well, I'm ordered by the court to put Mister O'Ballahoe in possession of the property, and as I was afeard you wouldn't listen to reason, I've brought a posse to take possession," the sheriff replied, endeavoring to be very stern and official in his manner. "I've got a sworn duty to execute, and you mustn't blame me if I put the thing through. If you attempt to resist and blood is spilt, you and your men will have to answer to the law for it."

Then abruptly spoke the young stranger, Jack Mohave:

"Mr. Creegan, I am something of a lawyer, and since there is a good deal of legal business mixed in this matter, will you allow me to act as your adviser and say a few words to the sheriff?"

"Certainly," replied Creegan, who did not exactly know what to make of this.

Nor did the sheriff, who rather resented the interference.

"I don't see that thar's any call for you to interfere," he grumbled.

"I reckon that Mr. Creegan is entitled to a lawyer's advice as well as the party for whom you are acting," Mohave replied, sharply.

"Thar you are out, young fellar. I ain't acting for any party; I am acting for the law, I am," the sheriff rejoined. "All I know is this bit of paper, this court order, which I hold in my hand."

"Issued by whom?"

"Judge Jake McKinney."

"Are you sure of it—are you acquainted with the judge's signature, and is it correctly drawn and sealed according to law?"

"I know the judge's signature as well as I do my own, and as for the rest, cast your blinkers over it and see if it ain't all right and regular."

And the sheriff came up to the wall and handed the paper to Mohave.

But it slipped from his fingers and fluttered down behind the wall; Mohave quickly stooped and captured it again, though, disappearing for a moment behind the wall, then rising into view.

He opened the paper and perused the contents, then uttered an exclamation of surprise.

"Hallo! what's this?" Mohave cried. "This order made by Judge Jacob McKinney appoints Michael Creegan as receiver of the Black Cloud property, and directs you to see that that gentleman is put in possession!"

"You're crazy, man!" cried the sheriff, and a hum of astonishment came from all the bystanders, while Pendragon and the Irish lawyer looked at each other bewildered.

They were near enough to overhear all the conversation.

The sheriff snatched the document from the hands of Mohave and glared at it in wonder.

"What the blazes does this mean?" he cried.

"It does say Michael Creegan, but there's some blamed trick 'bout it, for the document I gave you had Paudeen O'Ballahoe's name in it; I'll swear to that on a pile of Bibles as big as a haystack."

"It is a genuine paper, isn't it?" asked Mohave.

"Oh, yes, thar ain't no discount on that," replied the official, totally bewildered.

"Look at the date."

"The nineteenth!" fairly howled the sheriff; "and t'other was the eighteenth. I kin swar to that!"

"Exactly, and here it is," and Mohave produced the other paper, which he had dextrously crumpled up in his hand while concealed for the moment by the wall.

"It is a very simple matter; the judge thought it better that the property should remain as it is, in the possession of Mr. Creegan, and so at my solicitation issued this second order which annuls the first. Now then, the question is which one will you obey? You know well enough which one you ought to give heed to. The order has been placed in your hands, and I want to see you attempt to disregard it if you dare."

This revelation was like a thunder-clap to all.

"Go ahead, sheriff, this other order is a barefaced forgery!" cried Pendragon, purple with rage.

"You are a liar, Larry Pendragon, and you know it!" cried Mohave, leaping down from the wall and advancing to meet the millionaire, who had started toward the sheriff.

CHAPTER XL.

REVOLVER AGAINST REVOLVER.

THE millionaire grew red with rage at being thus rudely accosted, while the sheriff stared in amazement.

"Who are you?" Pendragon cried, "and what do you mean by daring to insult me thus grossly?"

"Don't you know me?" Is it possible that you have forgotten me so soon?" the other queried.

Both of the men had continued to advance, and now they were within ten feet of each other, and halted.

Pendragon gazed earnestly into the face of Jack Mohave.

"It seems to me as if your features are familiar, yet I have met so many blackguards since I came to this region that it is not to be expected I can remember every common scoundrel that I have encountered," the Silver King answered coarsely.

"I am known in this camp as Jack Mohave, but that is not the name by which you knew me, and I have changed materially since last we met; I am rightly called Nebraska Blake, and there is a long account which you and I must settle between us."

There was a general exclamation of surprise from all the bystanders at this avowal, for it was entirely unexpected, no one in the camp having the slightest suspicion of the truth.

Pendragon was puzzled.

The face of the man and his voice were both familiar to him, and yet, although he was well acquainted with the story of young Blake's mysterious disappearance, he had never, to his knowledge met the man.

"If you are Nebraska Blake, you are a stranger to me; I don't know you by that name, yet I think I have run across you somewhere, though I can't place you, but I reckon that I don't owe you anything, and if I do you will have a difficult job to collect the bills," replied the millionaire, arrogantly.

"That remains to be seen; but first I will prove the debt before I attempt to collect it."

"You are a cruel scoundrel, Larry Pendragon; you took advantage of my father's weakness to induce him to sell you the controlling interest in this Black Cloud property for about a half of what it was worth, but that is not the gravest charge."

"By means of your money you dazzled the eyes of a fickle, vain, tiger-hearted woman, and in order to accept your suit she condemned a man who had lost his good name for her sake to a life-long imprisonment, or else to banishment from his native land."

"She used you as the instrument to destroy the man whom she believed to be dangerous to her, and you, vile wretch, miserable scoundrel, gladly accepted the task!"

"I know you now, John Denver!" cried Pendragon.

"Ay, risen from the grave, as it were, to call you to an account and all your schemes have gone amiss since I entered the lists against you. Did you know that the woman whom you were so anxious to win died last night?"

"What, Estelle dead?" cried, Pendragon, shocked at the intelligence.

"She burst a blood-vessel last night; hurried to her last account with all her sins upon her head. The report of the tragedy was all over Del Norte by ten o'clock last night."

"You infernal scoundrel, I believe you murdered her!" cried the millionaire, in a sudden burst of passion, and he plucked forth his revolver, for it had suddenly flashed upon him that this man was the one who had been dealing him such terrific blows in the dark, and in his rage he had resolved to take the law into his own hands.

But young Blake was on the watch, and the expression in the eyes of the millionaire betrayed his murderous purpose.

Both men drew their weapons simultaneously, and the reports of the pistols as they fired them were so near together that they seemed like a single discharge.

Both men staggered—both were evidently hit. The spectators almost held their breath so intense was the interest.

A single second of suspense only, and then Larry Pendragon sunk down, evidently badly hurt, while his opponent, though wounded, kept his position.

The sheriff hastened to the side of the millionaire.

"Are you badly hurt?" he cried.

The millionaire raised his head as if endeavoring to speak, and then with a convulsive gasp, rolled over, dead.

The fight for the Black Cloud property was ended.

The sheriff rose to his feet.

"Well, you've cooked his goose for sure," he remarked.

"I call you to witness that I acted solely in self-defense," young Blake remarked, coldly. "He drew his weapon first, and if I had not killed him, most surely he would have settled me; as it is, I've got an ugly wound in the shoulder."

"Oh, yes, I s'pose it was a fair fight enough," the sheriff admitted, "but I reckon thar'll have to be some kind of a trial."

"Certainly; I'll be on hand whenever I am wanted. I shall not run away yet awhile."

The death of the millionaire of course put a stop to the struggle for the mine.

The heirs of the dead man, and there was a legion of them, gladly compromised the matter with Creagan, and so he and Blake remained in possession of the property.

As the reader has probably surmised long ere this, it was Nebraska Blake who had been playing the role of the mysterious road-agent.

With the noble-hearted folly of youth when surprised in a position that might give occasion for aspersions against the good name of the woman he so truly loved, he concealed his identity from all the world and suffered himself to be immured in a prison under a false name, thus burying himself from society as completely as though he had gone down into his grave.

She for whom this sacrifice was made had secretly assured him that she would move both heaven and earth to procure his release, and so patiently he waited for time to bring about the desired result; but when Pendragon visited him in prison, and he discovered that he had been betrayed by the woman whom he loved, a fierce craving for revenge took possession of his soul, and he bent all his energies to endeavor to escape.

Fortune favored him at last; an expert swimmer, the river led him to freedom, and accident threw in his way the body of a drowned man, much mutilated by contact with the rocks.

He exchanged clothes with the corpse and then made his way to the West, eager for vengeance upon both man and woman, and on his arrival in Colorado, when he discovered what had transpired during his absence, he determined to give Pendragon the greatest fight of his life.

He procured a wax mask, skillfully molded, which covered all of his face except the mouth and chin, then by the aid of phosphorus rubbed upon the mask and the exposed lower part of his face he produced the unearthly appearance which gave him the name of Fire Face.

He opened communication with the girl Dolly Muggles by letter, and so induced her to take a position in the hotel where she could play the spy upon Pendragon and the Irish lawyer, and so reveal their plans to him.

Disguised as a boy, she warned him that Pendragon would pass through the desolated canyon, and so led to the first attack.

With rare skill the avenger organized a band of trusty men, who aided him when he dealt the bold stroke at the millionaire, which culminated at Santa Fe.

Against the wealth and influence of the millionaire, the avenger opposed foxlike cunning and lion-like force.

Estelle Del Carmen must be punished for her baseness and the millionaire made to understand that mere money was not always to triumph over everything else in the world.

But Heaven itself had stricken down the guilty woman, and accident had brought about the fight in which the millionaire had fallen by the hand of the man who had put both brains and courage against his advantages.

The struggle was ended, and our tale is told.

A few more words and we are through.

Young Blake was tried for the murder of Pendragon and acquitted on the ground of self-defense.

Nebraska Blake settled down in Blakeville, acting for his father in the business of the mine.

Relieved of the incubus cast upon it by the millionaire's attacks, the property prospered, and report says there is no richer lode in Colorado.

Rumor says, too, that soon true and faithful Dolly will be the wife of the man whom she so long adored in secret, and she only in all the camp suspects that it was Nebraska Blake who squared accounts with Larry Pendragon as the mysterious road-agent, the man with the Fire Face.

THE END.

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